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RANCH ROMANCES

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

5c

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EST JANUARY NUMBER

FEATURING

DESERT RENDEZVOUS

By Walker A. Tompkins

THE LONG TRAIL HOME

By Cy Kees

WESTERN MOVIE NEWS

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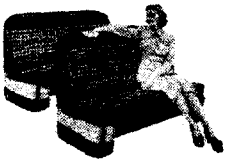

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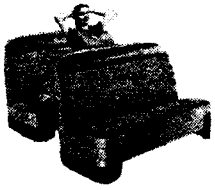

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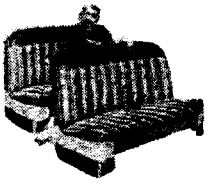

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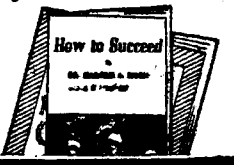

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29th Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST
JANUARY NUMBER

January 9, 1953
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RANCH ROMANCES

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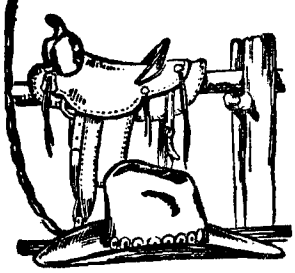

FANNY ELLSWORTH
Editor

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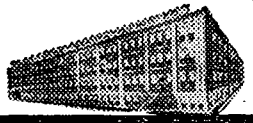

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Mason Shoe Mfg. Co.
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Address .....

Town ..... State .....

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From a Newspaperman

Dear Editor:

Working for a newspaper is supposed to be exciting but it can be anything but fun at times, and believe you me it cramps your social life. You never know when a date is going to be interrupted by the wail of a siren or your sleep rudely shattered by the telephone. Since I have been put on the night shift I need something to do with my days and would like some new friends.

I am not quite twenty-five, 5'8", have brown hair and blue eyes. Have seen quite a bit of these United States and have seen more behind the scenes than ever hits the front page, so will try to be interesting. So how about filling my mail box so the postmaster won't give me such a a quizzical look every time I pay the rent.

JAMES L. SPURLOCK

Box 283
Danville, Ill.

Texas Housewife

Dear Editor:

Hello—may a Texas housewife join your wonderful Air Mail Corner? I just moved to this city last July and having been raised in another city, I'm pretty lonesome and need pen pals.

I am 30 years old, have black curly hair, brown eyes and a dark complexion. I'm 5'5½" tall and weigh 147 lbs. I'm of Indian-Irish parentage. I love all outdoor sports, dancing and most of all letter writing. So come on, everyone is welcome, and I'll answer all letters I receive.

DARLEE ALLEN

Rt. #3, Box 169-B
Amarillo, Texas

Army Vet

Dear Editor:

How about putting me on your list? I love to receive mail, especially from those in the armed forces, both men and women. I am a veteran, age 30, and I live in sunny Florida. Since coming out of the army, I find civilian life a little dull sometimes, and miss all my old buddies. I work in a war plant at the present time, am considered a good sport, and love a good time. I am five feet nine, brown hair and blue eyes, suntan complexion, as I spend a great deal of time on the beaches. Hope that some of you readers will give me a chance to write; here's for a try.

JACK SHEPHARD

61 N. W. 79th Street
Miami 38, Florida

Attention, Stamp Collectors!

Dear Editor:

This call for pen pals comes from Manila, way out in the Pacific. I'm 26, 5'4", 100 pounds, dark brown hair and green eyes. My hobbies are sports, stamp collecting, and reading, especially Westerns. I would enjoy corresponding with stamp collectors all over the world.

MARIE VIOLETA G. VARA

630 Cataluna St.
Sampaloc, Manila
Philippine Islands

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 27 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Calling All Guys and Gals

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for sometime now and enjoy it very much, always look forward to each month's issue.

I wish to make my plea for pen pals from far and wide. I am 23 years of age; five feet 11½ inches tall, blond hair and brown eyes. I like to dance, go swimming and bowl. I also like fishing and hunting.

I would like to correspond with any of your guys and gals my age and promise to answer everyone, will exchange snapshots. So come on and fill this lonely person's mail box.

KENNETH MORROW

Box 358
College Station, Texas

Tall and Lonely

Dear Editor:

Do you have room for this lonely Colorado girl? I'm 20 years old, have blonde hair and blue eyes, weigh 140, and I'm 5'8" tall. Because of my height I find it difficult to find companions. I would love to hear from anyone, both sexes, who have the same difficulty. I'm a beauty operator and play the piano, I enjoy dancing and horse back riding. Please fill my mail box, I promise to answer all letters.

JOANNE BROWN

610 S. 4th Street
Montrose, Colo.

Junior College Graduate

Dear Editor:

I am hoping that through this letter I can begin a correspondence with someone who likes to write and receive mail. I shall try and answer all letters I may receive, also exchange photos. I am 19 and have graduated from a junior college in the middle west. I am about 5'4½" tall, medium brown hair, blue eyes. I love most all sports, animals and music. I am employed in the office of an electrical supply house.

JEANANNE BLANKENBURG

434 E. Main St.
Fort Wayne, Indiana

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Farm Lad

Dear Editor:

I have tried several times to get a letter published in RANCH ROMANCES, but have never yet succeeded. But I'm not discouraged.

I am a young veteran 5'8" tall, weigh 140 lbs., and have black hair and blue eyes. I would like to hear from cowboys, ranchers, sailors, chorines and grandmothers. All will be welcomed and answered. As a hobby I do scenic art and try to be a musician. I live on a farm and letters would help tremendously to break the monotony.

COY M. HAYNES

Oakman, Ga.

Lonely Sailor

Dear Editor:

I am just a lonely sailor in Uncle Sam's Navy, and I'm glad that I am. I'm 21 years old, have brown hair, blue eyes and I am 5'8" tall. I'm not the athletic type, but I do like hunting, fishing, basketball, and football. I also like to receive and write letters to girls. I would prefer girls from 17 to 21 to write to. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots with everyone.

RAYMOND E. KING SN L-div.
USS Pittsburgh CA-72
c/o FPO, New York, N. Y.

From the Tropics

Dear Editor:

Wouldn't someone like to write to two lonely gals from the Isles of June? Eleanor is 22 years old, 5'2", blonde hair and blue eyes, while Violet is 21 years old, 5'3", brown hair and brown eyes. We both love to write letters and there's plenty to write about these tropic isles. Please write.

ELEANOR KELLEY Box 53
VIOLET JOHNSON Box 43

Nassau, N. P.
Bahamas, B.W.I.

Cheer Her Up!

Dear Editor:

I hope you will publish my request for some pen friends. I'm 10 years old, weigh 89 lbs. and I'm 57 inches tall. I have medium blond hair and green eyes. I have been sick for 4 years but like horses, dogs, cats and lambs. I have to stay in bed most of the time so won't you please write and cheer me up?

CHARLOTTE RICH

Meeker, Colo.
c/o Carl Seely

Prairie Cowboy

Dear Editor:

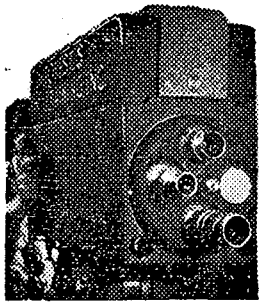
Can a lonely cowboy get into OUR AIR MAIL? I am on a 40,000 acre ranch on the prairies, and I promise to answer all letters, and exchange snapshots.

I am 23 years old, 6' tall, weigh 157 lbs. and have brown hair and brown eyes. I also have worked in several pictures. I would like to hear from guys and gals of all ages from 10 to 100, so send 'em pronto, Amigos! I also like swimming, football, photography and riding.

GENE MOORE

Bar N. Ranch
Midland, S.D.

MEN 17 to 45 WANTED



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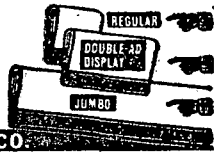

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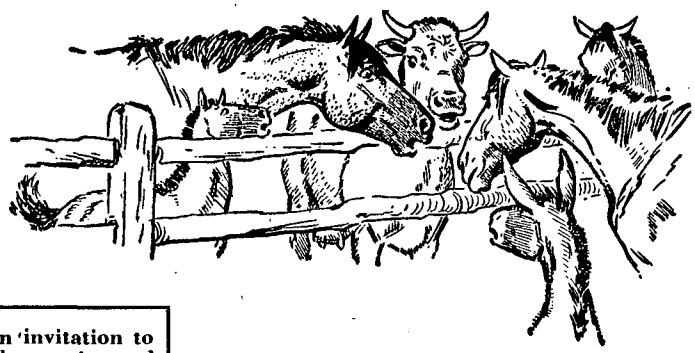
TRAIL DUST



PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found there. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

AT AN IDAHO agricultural station, the purebred cattle were in for a treat on their menu. Molasses was mixed with the foodstuff. The experimenters weren't counting on a hive of bees though. Just as the last of the sweet morsel was being consumed, the bees settled down, and were promptly lapped up. This didn't seem to affect the steers—so the bees moved up and sat on the steers' tongues. Then the steers took the hint, refusing to eat the *à la carte* concoction until the bees were finished.

DOWN IN Trenton, Missouri, burglars who broke into an ice company recently got a chilly reception. What cash they found was cold, all right—but there was only 60 cents.

RESIDENTS of Crook County, Oregon, were so besieged by pollsters in the recent elections that they decided from now on, they aren't talking. In every election since 1800 the county voted in favor of the candidate who turned out to be the majority choice of voters across the nation. Having their political pulse taken every day made them sick, they affirmed.

A FARMER out in the Lewis and Clark area of Oregon packed up his hunting gear and went to Eastern Oregon where the law says a hunter can hunt. He traveled over 1,000 miles, came back tired and dusty, but with nary a deer. As he was washing his car, he saw a huge blacktail deer behind his chicken coop. He dropped his sponge, grabbed his gun. Dressed, the deer weighed close to 200 pounds. What's more, it was legal—bagged in his own backyard!

ONE OF OUR Canadian neighbors thought he'd make a pet of a little brown bear he rescued from a tree. He locked his newfound playmate in a shed. Not much later mama bear came along, shattered the shed door, and dragged her naughty cub back to the woods where he belonged.

WHEN a pistol-toting man requested nail polish from the information clerk of Walla Walla's Chamber of Commerce, it caused quite a stir. He wasn't a manicured bandit, it turned out—just a local police officer who discovered that nail polish on the front sight of his gun permitted better focusing. He was on his way to target practise—perfectly law-abiding, and not knowing how he'd upset the girl.

WE HEARD of a town where the sheriff's dog ended up in the local pound. On the trail of an escaping fugitive, he was picked up by the dogcatchers in a case of mistaken identity. They were looking for a reported sick dog. The sad-eyed pup seemed to qualify. Had no idea the canine was an officer of the law on official duty, they apologized later.

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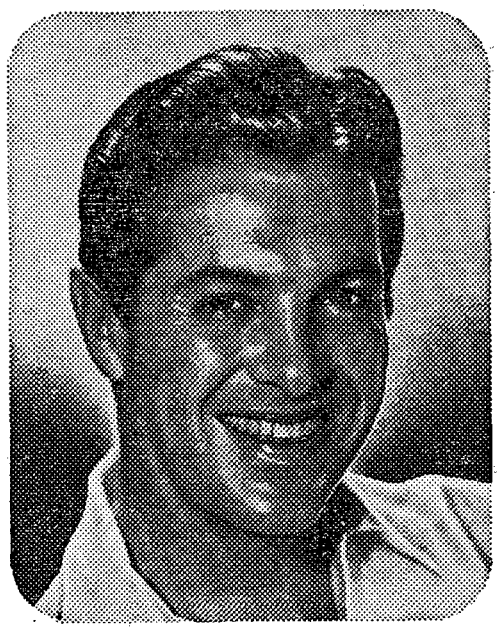
RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

Round up the Western flickers and heat the iron! Bob Cummings, RANCH ROMANCES' new film foreman, aims to slap his critical brand on them.

No stranger to the West, this son of Missouri is raring to go into action on the pictures that gave him his start in Hollywood—Westerns. Bob had been charming Broadway audiences as a handsome leading man when he landed a lead in a saddle saga. He's been a Hollywood star ever since.

Away from the camera and footlights, Bob stays pretty close to the home range with his wife and three children. Occasionally though, he hits the sky-trails in his own plane, one that's packed with something dear to his heart —horsepower!



Hangman's Knot and The Man Behind the Gun

Both Columbia Pictures and Warner Bros. star Randy Scott in historical Western dramas

RANDY SCOTT is a demon for work. He's to be seen currently in two movies—*The Man Behind the Gun,* made at Warner Bros., and *Hangman's Knot,* produced by Scott-Brown Productions in which Randy is a partner.

Usually when an actor starts producing his own movies it's because he doesn't like parts the studios have cast him in, and/or he thinks he'd be more successful as his own boss.

But neither of these motives could possibly be Randy's. In the first place, he's been making Westerns for the big studios, and he also makes Westerns on his own, so he obviously hasn't been unhappy about his parts. And in the second place, Randy has been snugly on the list of the top ten box-office stars for the past three years.

The explanation must be that Randy likes to spend all his time making movies.

Both pictures have a historical setting. *Hangman's Knot* is laid right after the Civil War, and Randy plays a Confederate officer sent West to hold up a bullion train. He completes his mission and many men are killed, but he finds that the bloodshed and heroism were in vain—the war has been over for a month.

Donna Reed plays a Union Army Nurse who cannot forget that a soldier in gray is her enemy, and Claude Jarman, Jr., plays

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the rôle of Randy's young side-kick.

If you still think of Claude as he was in *The Yearling,* you've got a surprise coming. He's now a towering young man of six feet two who can mount a galloping horse without touching the stirrups. He's been growing fast, but aging normally—this year he's ready to enter college back in Nashville, Tenn.

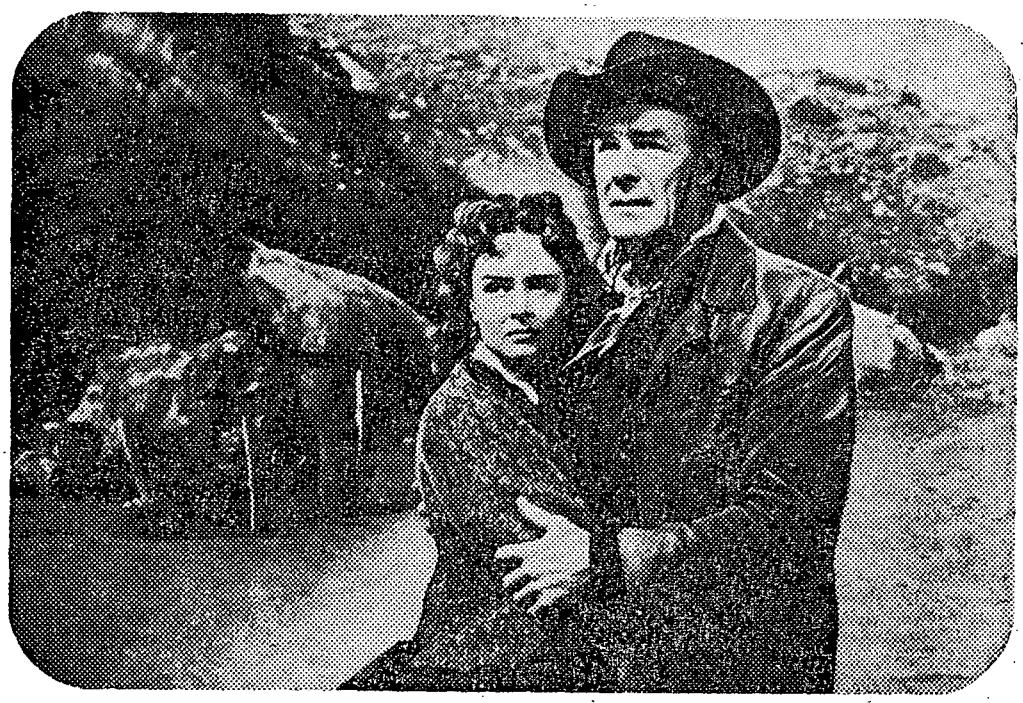
Hangman's Knot was filmed in Technicolor almost entirely on location in the High Sierras near Lone Pine, Calif.

The setting for *The Man Behind the Gun* is just as wild in its way but nowhere near as rural. This is a story of Los Angeles in the Gold Rush days, when the City of Angels was half as big as San Francisco and several times as wicked. A publicity release from Warner Bros. says that studio researchers unearthed some old civic records which show that while San Francisco had one saloon or dance hall for every hundred residents, in Los Angeles the ratio was one for every 55! LA could also boast four times as many crimes per head, if crime was ever a bragging matter in the City of Angels. Warner Bros. sidesteps any modern competition in iniquity by ending the release with the statement that present day statistics were not studied.

Patrice Wymore is Randy's co-star in *The Man Behind the Gun,* and Lina Romay sings a sure-fire hit—*La Paloma,* the first song to sweep California, and perhaps with new lyrics the latest to sweep the country.

We can't name the cast without mentioning Stardust, Randy's favorite mount. This is their fifth picture together, but until recently Randy rode him only before the cameras. Randy has been trying to buy Stardust from his owner, Ace Hudkins, but as usual it was no sale.

"I like Stardust too much to sell him," said Ace with a sigh, "so I guess there's only one way to settle this. I'll give him to you." That's real love for an animal!



Randy Scott, disguised Confederate, comforts Donna Reed, a Union nurse in Columbia's "Hangman's Knot"

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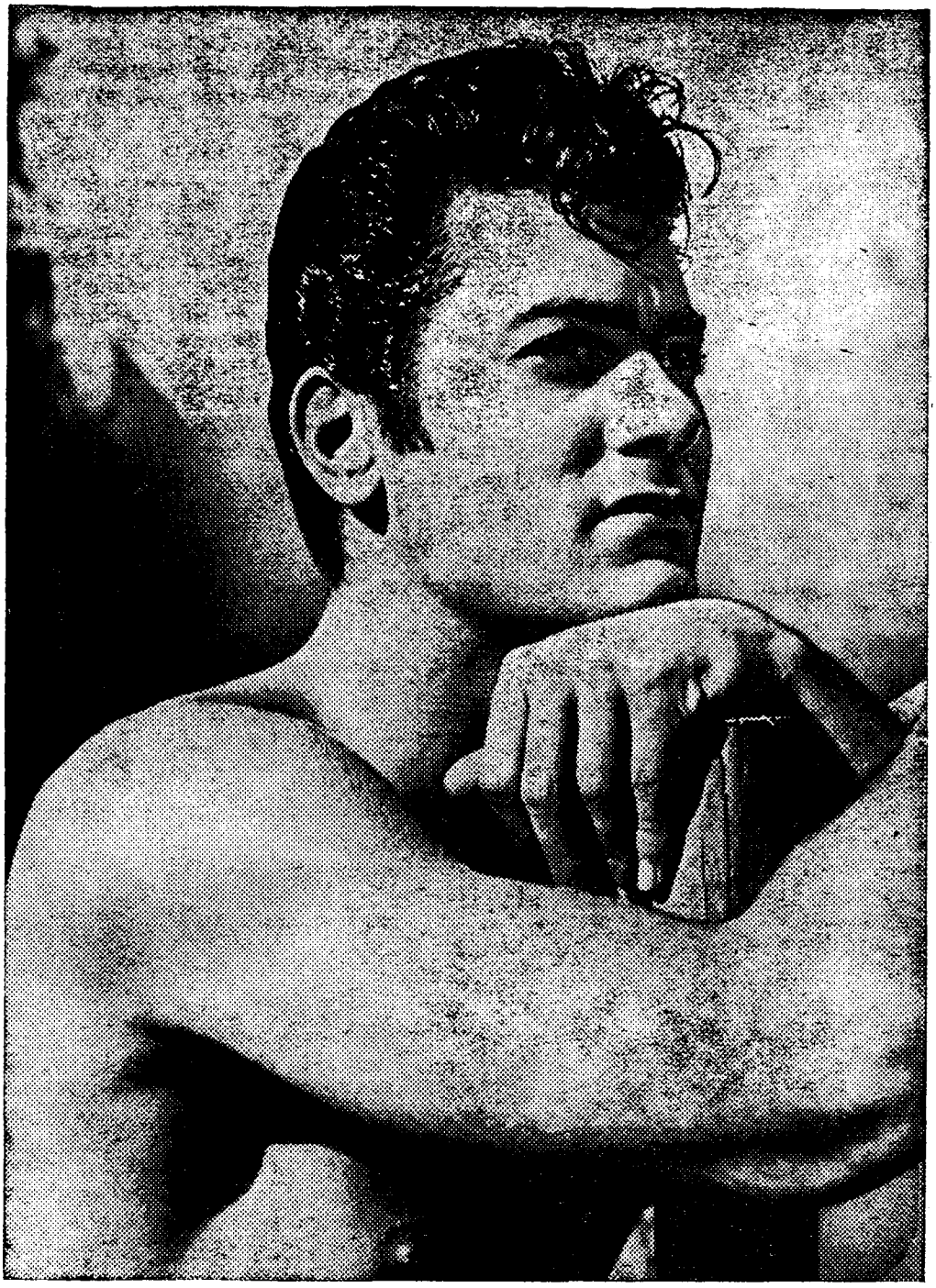

Universal-International

The screen didn't credit him, but the fans did

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TONY CURTIS
From Slum to Stardom

RANCH FLICKER TALK

"MAN, THIS is crazy!" says Tony Curtis when he likes something. It's a phrase Tony uses a lot these days—to describe his tremendous popularity with the fans, in appreciation of the red carpet treatment Hollywood is giving him and, most often, to express his happiness with his bride Janet Leigh.

Tony's enthusiasm for what's been happening to him is mixed with incredulity, but that doesn't stop him from enjoying it.

He grew up in a New York slum, belonged to a neighborhood gang. He remembers prowling the streets at night, looking for trouble as a means to prove how tough he was. But at 11 he got what he calls the biggest break of his life—even including the Hollywood break that made him a star.

At 11 he met a man at a boys' club who knocked the chips off Tony's shoulders and made him like it. He learned honesty and self-respect, and by the time he was 12, Tony was a Boy Scout.

He comes by his acting talent naturally. His father, Mono Schwartz, had been an actor in Budapest, though language difficulties forced him to earn his living in this country as a tailor.

Tony was in the Navy before he graduated from high school, but he finished his studies after he'd been discharged. Then he set about becoming an actor, playing with YMCA groups, little theaters and those perennially broke, off-Broadway groups where the stars of tomorrow often learn their trade. A talent scout for Universal-International (to whom Tony is still under contract) saw him there and sent him to Hollywood.

"This is it," said Tony to himself as he flew across the country, and his opinion of his own success was confirmed when a studio limousine met him at the airport and whisked him to a luxury hotel. He didn't give much thought to the fact that the studio had hired him at $100 a week—until he got his first paycheck, which, minus deductions, came to $17.08. Tony moved to a boarding house.

It didn't take long for Tony to get a raise, though. His first role was a bit for which he didn't even get screen credit, but the fan mail came in all the same, addressed to "The cute fellow who danced with Yvonne de Carlo."

Since then his mail had jumped with every picture. A few months after he arrived in Hollywood he was getting the real "A-treatment" —his own private dressing room, swarming with reporters, and starring parts in million dollar productions. Can you blame him for saying, "Man, this is crazy!"

His romance with Janet Leigh was followed breathlessly by the newspapers and magazines, and the newlyweds found it rather difficult to have a private honeymoon. Tony may get tired of the hoopla some day, but he hasn't yet. Maybe the biggest thrill of his success is the pride his parents take in it. They class him with his great-grandfather who was heretofore the biggest man of the family, a 7-foot giant who was a circus strongman,

Tony can't compare to him in size. In fact he gets annoyed when he's referred to as a handsome 6-footer. He wants it understood that he's exactly 5 feet 10½ inches and no taller.

A veteran actor, watching Tony's exuberance at the studio the other day, sighed and said, "Thay're cute at that age, aren't they?"

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Desert

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

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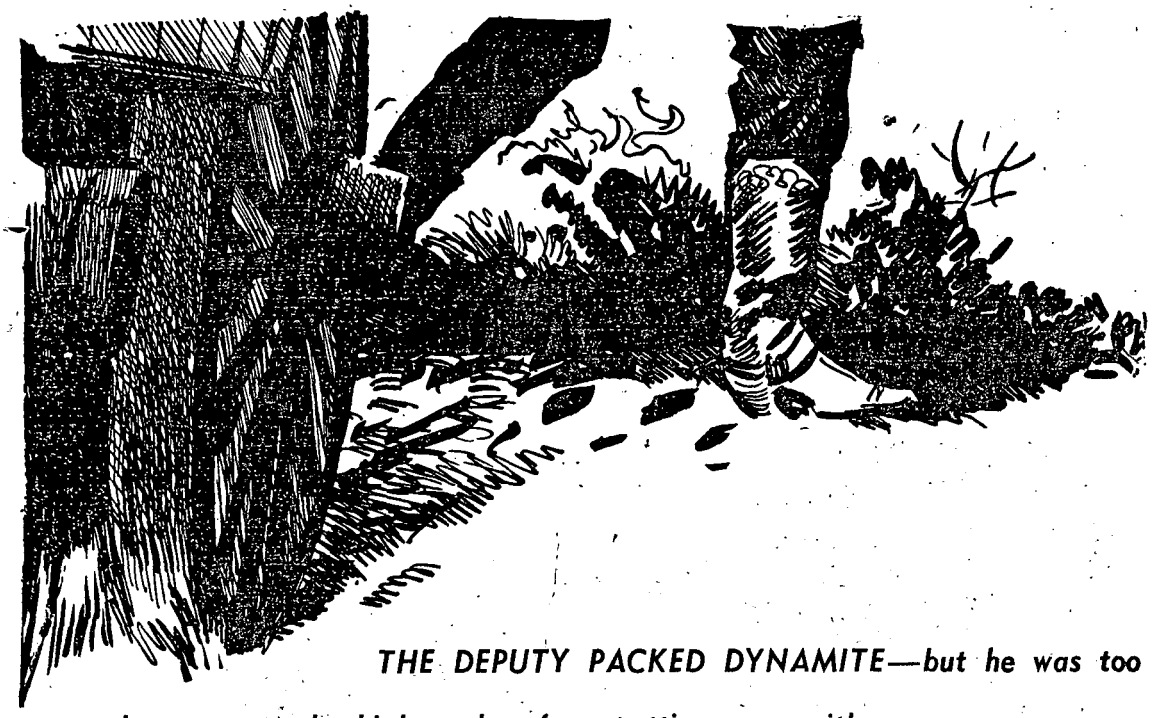

THE DEPUTY PACKED DYNAMITE—but he was too lazy to stop the high-graders from getting away with murder until a girl came along . . . and set a match to him

Rendezvous

THE night Oatie Simmons confided that he was a deputy U.S. Marshal on a man-hunt happened to be the tenth anniversary of Hamp Adams' arrival in Ruby City. The news, totally unexpected as it was, ruined a record of ten years' utter peace and freedom from worry.

They called Hamp the laziest cuss on the Mojave Desert, a tribute he was careful not to deny. It was true, though, that the surrounding California badlands had shielded Hamp

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Adams from worldly woes as completely as if he had been a monk cloistered in a monastery, instead of an ex-muleskinner from Death Valley.

Oatie Simmons had drifted down from Inyo County three months ago to "prospect," he had told Hamp, which was a fishy excuse, looking back on it; two generations of prospectors had gleaned the last color from Ruby's ore heaps, forty-odd years ago, and Hamp felt duty bound to tell Oatie so. But Oatie wasn't impressed.

SYLVIA CURTIS

HAMP ADAMS

"I'll make my strike," Oatie had replied, and Hamp knew enough to keep his mouth shut after that.

Then, at supper last night, Oatie had sworn Hamp to secrecy, there in the stuffy kitchen of the Freighter's Rest Hotel, and had shown him his law badge and mentioned a man-hunt. . . .

Hamp hadn't slept very well last night, thinking about it. His own conscience was clear enough; but the thought that Ruby City's tiny populace harbored a criminal was disturbing. Oatie had shut up like a clam when it came to details. "You'll know who I'm after," the lawman had hinted darkly, "when I spring my trap. It's a big case, kid. Only reason I'm telling you this much is because I may need your help directly."

This morning, Hamp was too fidgety to remain idle. Remembering he had some freight to pick up over at the Santa Fe depot, he hitched up his mule wagon and set out. At the crest of the south ridge he halted his rickety vehicle and peered back at Ruby City.

The inexorable assault of the elements

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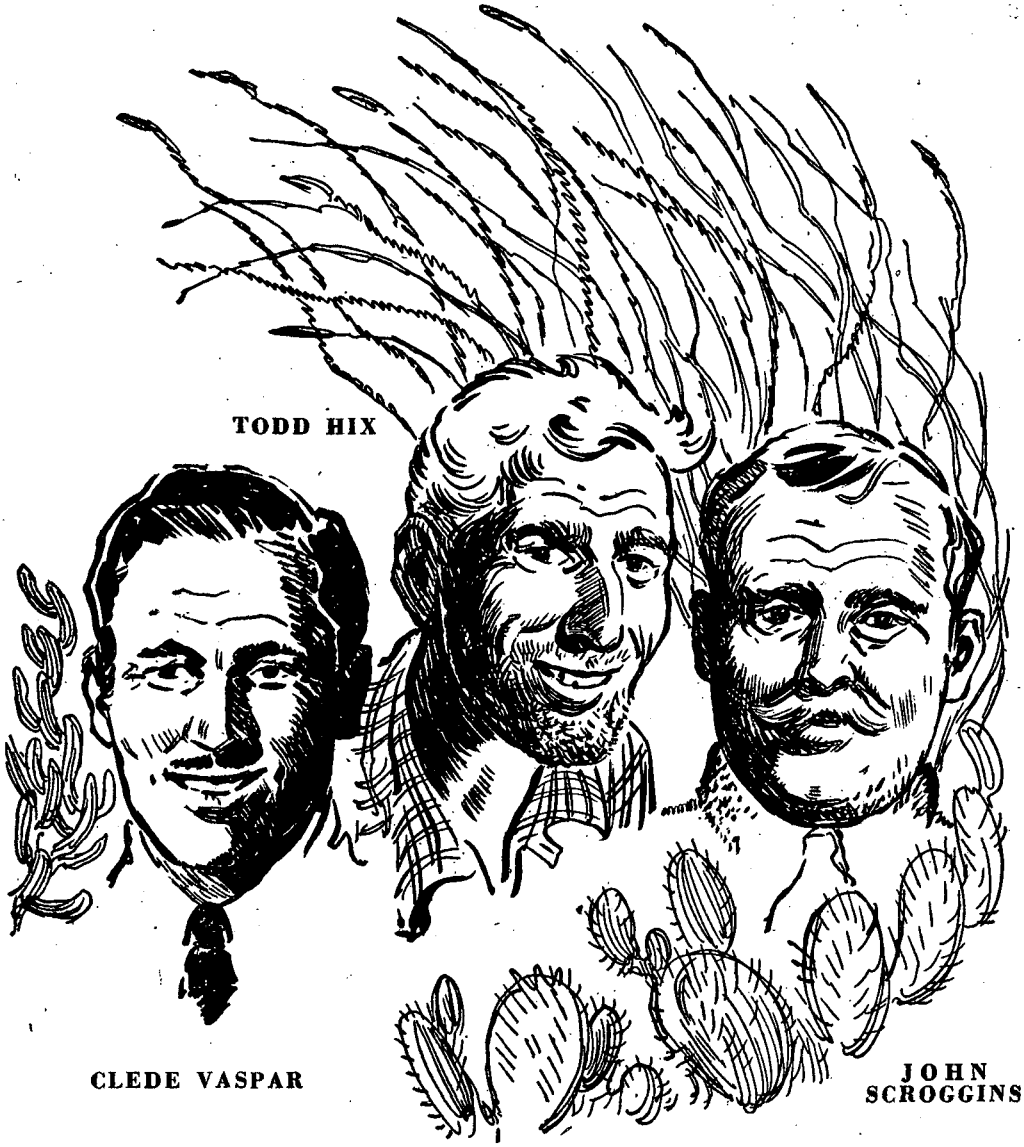
had laid a punishing hand on the town, reducing it to a drab scatter of sun-baked shacks. To eyes less prejudiced than Hamp's, Ruby was made insignificant by the sheer immensity of its wilderness setting, its ugly outlines accentuated by the tened ephemerally in the heat-shimmer, giving an illusion that the malpais was one with the arching sky.

Time was—back in the '60s—when Ruby had boasted a population of five thousand, evenly divided between miners and riffraff.



Mojave's austere grandeur and the beauty of far-seen California mountains.

There was soul-food to be had in the arid landscape which vaulted the purple Calicos and led the eye endlessly northward to where the Sierra snowfields glis-

Ruby had been a ghost camp even before Hamp was born. It was in the last stages of decay when Hamp had first seen its ramshackle shape looming through the lifting alkali dust stirred by twenty mules, hauling Hamp's tandem-hitched borax

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wagons south from Windy Gap. Ruby was then, and still was, an overnight camp for mulewhackers freighting ore from Cerro Gordo and the Panamints, borax and phosphates from Death Valley. But for Hamp Adams, born twenty-seven years ago in distant Alabama, Ruby City was home.

TEN years he had lived here, and prospered. Going to seed, his kinfolks claimed. But what the hell? He was making triple the monthly wage of muleskinners and swampers, and not working himself to the bone doing it.

Up until yesterday, when he had learned who Simmons was, worry was a word missing from Adams' vocabulary. The kid from Dixie who had come west with a hacking cough and a doctor's verdict that he would not live to see his next Christmas was now a man who scaled close to two hundred without an ounce of excess tissue on his six-foot-some frame.

Hamp clucked his tongue and the lethargic mules got the buckboard started down the south slope toward the maroon and olive depot, hardly larger than a privy, which was Ruby City's freight station on the Santa Fe.

A feather of smoke befouled the clean sky to eastward. At the vanishing-point of the twin bands of steel which led to Arizona, Hamp could see the crawling black dot which was the Overland Express.

Backing his wagon against the plank loading platform where he would pick up the freight which a passing train had deposited there a week ago, Hamp caught sight of Clede Vaspar lounging in the shade of the freight-house awning.

Vaspar was the most recent addition to Ruby City's twenty-odd permanent residents. He was patently a tinhorn gambler, and did not fit his surroundings. Proprietor of the Golden West Casino—in Ruby's heyday a fabulous establishment with a mahogany bar inlaid with silver dollars—Clede Vaspar was a parasite who lived off the hard-won earnings of the freighters who played his roulette wheel or bucked his card game.

Climbing off his wagon, Hamp Adams gave Vaspar the same hearty greeting he bestowed on any fellow human. Whatever his personal dislike might be for the man and his way of earning a living, Vaspar was part of Ruby City—and Ruby City was home. Maybe the dry climate had brought Vaspar to the desert; the perpetual pallor of the man's otherwise handsome face hinted at a deep-seated sickness.

Vaspar flicked aside his cigarette, ignoring Adams with his eyes. His greeting carried a surly impatience: "The station is locked, as usual. And Hix gave me his word this morning to be here at ten o'clock. Why does the railroad company keep that loafer on its payroll?"

Hamp Adams entered the belt of shadow under the awning and, reaching up to fumble between shingles and rafter, took down a brass key. He was always having to defend agent Todd Hix.

"Shucks, the agent figgers everybody knows how to open the freight shed," Adams chuckled, unsnapping a padlock and trundling open the shed door. "There's your whisky, Vaspar. If there's any shipping charges due, Hix will collect 'em in due time."

Adams never ceased to be amazed at the vast amounts of beer and whisky which Vaspar's patrons consumed; shipments such as the one now awaiting the gambler's pick-up were dropped off at the railroad station every other week, it seemed.

AT THE opposite end of the platform was Vaspar's rig, a democrat wagon drawn by a pair of matched bays. Vaspar had first showed up in Ruby City six months ago with that shiny equipage; he kept the bays at the Last Chance Livery and always insisted on grooming and graining them himself. A man who loved horseflesh, Adams figured, could be forgiven a lot of tinhorn traits. . . .

Adams had stowed the last of his own boxes and barrels in the buckboard by the time the 10:50 Express from Phoenix whistled for the Ruby City grade crossing. Clambering aboard his wagon, to hold the mules in check against the near passage of the locomotive and coaches, Adams was

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startled to see that the Overland was slowing down. Although there were no water tanks here, obviously the fast passenger was going to stop. Not in Adams' memory had such a thing occurred; odinarily the through trains whipped past the Ruby City station shack at better than a mile a minute.

That oversight on the part of Santa Fé's route surveyors had always seemed a regrettable thing to Hamp Adams. On the other hand, it shielded Ruby's naked ugliness from the scorn of passing travelers. . . .

The big diamond-stacked engine rumbled past in a cloud of woodsmoke, momentarily revolting Hamp's nostrils with the compounded stench of hot metal, lubricating oil and escaping steam. Brake shoes grated on metal; brake hoses gasped protestingly, hissing air like a winded animal breaking hard.

Hamp, busy keeping his sporting mules from bolting, saw the Overland Express come to a halt with its last coach directly opposite the Ruby City station shack. A blue-uniformed conductor emerged from the back platform, placed a foot-stool on the cinder roadbed apron, and reached up to address a passenger:

"Ruby City, ma'am. Is anyone here expecting you?"

At that moment Clade Vaspar was in the act of rolling a beer keg out of the freight shed. Hamp saw the black-coated man straighten up and flick something off his lapels, in the dandified manner of a man of vanity about to be glimpsed by feminine eyes.

Vaspar was staring at the coach platform, his coal-black eyes flashing with interest. Hamp swung his own gaze in that direction, in time to see the Santa Fe conductor giving a hand to a lady passenger clad in a pearl-gray traveling suit, her face shielded from Hamp's view at the moment by a wide-brimmed hat festooned with aigrette feathers.

As the girl stepped up on the low platform, she was followed by a Negro porter bent double under the burden of a camel-back trunk.

"*This*—is Ruby City?" the girl's contralto voice reached Hamp Adams above the impatient panting of the railroad engine further down the tracks. "Surely—there is some mistake—"

The conductor handed the footstool up to the colored man and gave the engineer the highball sign.

"Ruby—what there is left of it, I understand—is on the north side of that hill yonder, ma'am," the conductor said, and made his grab for the handrail of the coach as the Overland Express, its bell clanging impatiently, began to gather speed.

The girl turned to watch the train glide away into the immensity of the far desert, resuming its headlong rush toward the looming San Bernardino Range. Her face was in full view to Hamp Adams now, and sight of it made the man gulp a couple of times. Pretty girls were rare as nuggets in this desert.

IT WAS an uncommonly pretty face, framed in light-brown ringlets, shoulder-long. At the moment, the pair of extraordinarily blue eyes were watching the train's departure with obvious dismay. Then the girl's glance shifted and came to rest on Hamp Adams and his mule-drawn buckboard.

She saw a weather-bronzed man whose heavy chest and shoulders seemed to be bursting the seams of his faded hickory shirt: a man whose face was flecked with tobacco-colored freckles, polka-dotting his cheeks and aquiline nose. By no stretch of the imagination could Hamp Adams be called good-looking; but there was something in his twinkling gray eyes and the broad grin he gave her as he lifted his shapeless sand-colored Stetson which eased the taut fixture of the girl's cheeks instantly.

"If you're heading for Ruby, Miss," Hamp sang out in his boisterous way, "General Lee, General Grant—they're my lop-eared mules—and yours truly, Hamp Adams, would be glad to offer you a lift over the ridge."

The girl came forward hesitantly, responding to Adams' smile with one of her own.

"Thank you," she said. "I—am coming to Ruby City to make my home. If it

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wouldn't put you out too much—"

Clede Vaspar's suave voice cut off the girl: "Begging your pardon, miss, but I believe I have more comfortable transportation—"

The instant the girl turned to meet the full strike of Vaspar's charming smile and immaculate appearance, Hamp knew his gallantry had died aborning. Women never gave him a second glance. And Clede Vaspar was undeniably handsome.

He saw the girl glance toward Vaspar's spanking team and varnished rig, and knew how his own ramshackle equipage suffered by contrast. When she turned again to face Hamp, her voice held the apologetic reserve one would use with a servant:

"If the two generals wouldn't be offended, Mr. Adams—"

Hamp shrugged, his grin somehow forced as he caught the veiled taunt in Vaspar's glance.

"Sure, now, miss. Vaspar's got cushions on his wagon seat, too. Reckon you better go with him."

There was a wistful hurt in Hamp's expression now, which he shielded from the girl's gaze as he jockeyed his wagon around on the cinder strip between roadbed and platform. By rights, he should be volunteering to help Vaspar load the girl's trunk, but to hell with it. Let Vaspar earn his victory.

Life was getting almighty complicated, he reflected unhappily. Oatie Simmons a John Law on the hunt, and now this pretty girl saying she had come to live in Ruby permanently.

The prospect was exciting; the proximity of a girl of her beauty and youth would be a complete novelty. Vaspar, busy wrestling her trunk into his carriage, was already making his bid for the girl's exclusive attention, Hamp sensed bitterly.

He wondered what her name was. She was exciting, yes; but a troubling prospect as well.

This woman, so lately detrained here in the desert, was not the fancy breed such as the girls who had once plied their trade at Madam Gusto's California Hotel; she was pure quill and a thoroughbred lady, if Hamp knew anything about it.

WHERE, then, did she fit in? There were no young bucks living in Ruby who might have sent for a mail-order bride. No families who could be expecting a relative to move in with them. No families who could be expecting a relative to move in with them. The army had no outpost in the district, otherwise he might have tabbed her for an officer's wife. The Santa Fe's maintenance crews lived on boarding trains with their families. . . .

Hamp got his buckboard squared around and was getting ready to stand by so that Vaspar's rig would not have to eat his dust crossing the ridge, when his ears registered a crack of noise which sounded unmistakeably like a hand colliding with a man's cheek.

Twisting around in his wagon seat, Hamp Adams was in time to see the young woman leap out of Clede Vaspar's fancy wagon to the platform, her face white, mouth clamped. Vaspar, sitting there with the lines gripped in one hand, was in the act of reaching up to massage the near side of his jaw.

"I'll trouble you to unload my baggage, please!" the girl snapped in a controlled voice, acid-tart with anger.

Hamp Adams moved with surprising speed for a man of his indolent habits, vaulting his wagon seat and jumping to the ground. He made it to the far end of the Santa Fe platform at a reaching stride, his customarily good-natured face frozen in a grim fixture now as he rounded the front of Vaspar's team and came to a halt alongside the front wheel of the wagon.

Vaspar was staring straight ahead, fingering his cheek, his cold eyes cynically amused. The pressure of Hamp's heavy hand on the side rail of the wagon seat snapped Vaspar back to reality, irritation returning the vitality to his face as he snapped out, "Get on back to your mules, Hamp. This is no concern of yours."

"Ain't so sure," Hamp growled. "You got yourself slapped. How come?"

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From the edge of the platform the girl spoke stiffly, "Mr. Vaspar presumed on our short acquaintance to kiss me. I don't need any help, Mr. Adams, putting such men in their place."

Adams felt a white heat rising in him. Vaspar saw the storm signals in Hamp's eyes and dropped his indifferent air, becoming alert as a coiled snake.

"Don't back into the wrong stall, now, Adams!" the gambler warned. "You heard what Miss Curtis said about you horning in. I'm quite prepared to make my apologies."

Before Hamp could speak, the girl Vaspar had called Miss Curtis called out sharply, "Don't get the idea I am a maiden in distress, Mr. Adams. Don't start a quarrel over me. Mr. Vaspar, my trunk, if you please. I will not ride with you, apologies or otherwise."

Hamp Adams reached up to clamp a big fist on the pleated front of Vaspar's linen shirt. The gambler had no time to brace himself, his attention at that moment having been diverted to the girl; a moment later he was being hauled bodily from the wagon, to stand facing Adams.

"What I want to know," Hamp said inflexibly, "is why you figured Miss Curtis was cheap enough for you to slobber over, Vaspar. This time you overstepped your bounds and I aim to find out the why and wherefores of it."

THERE was fear blended with Vaspar's hate now. Shaking off Hamp's grip, he said on an exhaling breath, "She said she was the new owner of Madam Gusto's place. I naturally figgered kisses would be her stock in trade—"

Hamp flexed his elephantine shoulders, hands fisting at his sides. He was a man slow to wrath, but he was close to the boiling point now. Vaspar's words put a sudden damper on his temper.

He turned toward the girl standing at the platform's edge, hands akimbo on slim hips, biting her teeth in disgust as she saw a brawl shaping up with her honor as its incentive.

"Is that right, ma'am?" Adams demanded. "You come here to re-open Madam Gusto's—place?"

Miss Curtis bobbed her head emphatically, but the quick disillusionment in Hamp's face brought puzzlement to her now.

"I bought the California Hotel, yes. Is there anything so shocking about that? I met Mrs. Gusto in Phoenix. She told me she had a flourishing business for sale here in Ruby City. I bought her out. I was tired of working for other people all the time."

Vaspar said with unctuous contempt, "There, Hamp, you see? If you're trying to make a hero of yourself championing Miss Curtis, you're only succeeding in looking like a stupid ass. Go back to your wagon."

Vaspar's voice trailed off into a whisper, under cover of which he commented acidly on Hamp Adam's canine ancestry. For Hamp, it was the spark that ignited his sharp-curbed temper.

"No man," he said quietly, "ever called me that when he wasn't joshing, Clede. And you ain't joshing."

Vaspar had overplayed his hand and realized it too late. He saw Hamp's uppercut coming, but the piston-stroke speed of the blow defied the gambler's reflexive effort to dodge it. The girl gave a little scream and turned away as Hamp's knuckles met Vaspar's jaw with sudden impact and catapulted the man backwards into a clump of creosote brush.

The thought flamed through Adams then, I've made a killer my enemy—a backstabbing killer, and knew that the peaceful days he had enjoyed in Ruby City would never return again as long as Vaspar ran a saloon here.

Clede Vaspar's eyes carried a stunned glaze, but behind their flinty surfaces a reptilian poison was gathering. As the gambler picked himself up from the dust, Hamp saw the strange twitching movement of his right wrist, saw sunlight glint from the blued bore of a derringer which Vaspar slipped from an under-cuff clip.

Before Vaspar could bring the gun around Adams drove a boot to the gambler's

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The twin muzzles of the sawed-off shotgun loomed as Adams, rolling, tripped gunhammer to fire wildly

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right arm, knocking the little single-shot .41 flying. Following up his advantage, Adams smashed a looping haymaker to Vaspar's bleeding jaw and, before the man could wilt, seized him in both arms and hoisted him bodily into the wagon seat.

Vaspar crumpled sidelong, obviously insensible. Rounding the rear of the wagon, Adams reached over the end-gate to transfer the girl's camelback trunk to the station platform. Then, while Miss Curtis stared in slack-jawed dismay. Adams released the wagon brake, gave the nigh bay a slap on the rump, and stood back as the team broke into a trot.

"They'll wind up at Vaspar's saloon okay," he told the girl.

As Adams climbed up on the platform to pick up her trunk, the girl whispered in a shocked voice, "He—he tried to kill you. You shouldn't have struck him, Mr. Adams —"

"Vaspar," Adams said, "is a cheap tinhorn. Don't give him a second thought. He won't molest you again."

Shouldering her trunk, Hamp read the girl's name and address on the railroad tag: *Miss Sylvia Curtis, care of California Hotel, Ruby City, Calif.* Realizing what that signified, Hamp felt a sick sensation assail him. He said, "Reckon the Generals are waiting, ma'am," and headed down the platform toward his wagon.

AFTER he had stowed the trunk amid his freight boxes, Hamp gave Sylvia Curtis a hand up to the driver's seat. She had removed her elbow-length traveling gloves and Adams noted her left hand was devoid of rings. That kind wouldn't be engaged, he told himself morosely. Sure fooled me, though.

The girl, aware that something was needling her host, said nothing during the time it took Hamp to wake up the mules and start the wagon up the south grade of the ridge. Clede Vaspar's rig vanished over the skyline in a boil of dust ahead of them.

The heady perfume which touched Hamp's nostrils was subtle rather than rank; he gave her credit for that. When the wagon hit a chuckhole and jounced Sylvia's shoulder against his own, it gave him a pleasurable sensation he at once rejected.

Sylvia's coming to Ruby City hinted a change in the old somnolent order of things. She was excitingly beautiful and stubbornly independent, asking no favors because of her sex.

"Mr. Adams," the girl said shyly, "why

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did you scowl so when I said I'd bought out Madam Gusto?"

"I'm always scowling," he muttered uncomfortably.

The girl's puzzled, sidewise glance was on his profile as she opened a reticule on her lap and drew out a faded postcard.

"You mean a girl is foolish to buy a hotel sight unseen?" she asked. "Maybe I was, but I don't think so. According to Mrs. Gusto, Ruby City needs a hotel and there is business enough to show a steady profit. I saw her books before I bought."

Hamp relaxed his grip on the lines and the two Generals, feeling the leather ribbons relax in the hames, came to a full stop midway up the hill.

Adams took the post card which Sylvia handed him. It depicted in gaudy lithograph a two-story brick building, its upper gallery festooned with bunting for some holiday, its garish facade emblazoned in gilt letters, CALIFORNIA HOTEL, 1861. The photographer had further captioned the picture "Leading Hostelry of Ruby City, Cal."

"Does the hotel still look this way, Mr. Adams?" Sylvia inquired with girlish excitement. "Mrs. Gusto admitted it was rather run down, but I only paid her two thousand dollars for it. I can hardly wait to get my first glimpse of it—"

Adams handed back the card, his brows drawing together in a faint scowl as he replied thoughtfully, "That building is still standing, yes. What makes you think you can make a go of the hotel business, ma'am? A lone woman like you?"

Sylvia's smile dazzled Hamp. She was not far past twenty, he judged, and the neat gray traveling suit did not conceal the voluptuous curves of her young figure.

"I can't help but succeed," she said confidently. "Mrs. Gusto says there is only the one hotel in Ruby, and that business is steady because Ruby is a way-station for the ore and borax freighting trade—the only hotel between the mines and San Berdoo."

Adams squirmed uncomfortably. He had bad news for Sylvia Curtis, news that would break her glad young enthusiasm like a fragile flower crushed under a passing hoof. He felt a little sick inside, knowing what he did. But with it he felt elated. Sylvia wasn't what he'd thought she was, after all.

"Mrs. Gusto was correct as far as she went, I reckon," Adams said carefully. "There is only one hotel in Ruby. Wouldn't be trade enough for two, I reckon. Mrs. Gusto tell you she was in the hotel business, did she?"

Sylvia Curtis met his sliding gaze, the beginnings of worry graining fine wrinkles around her eyes.

"Yes. I—I suppose I ran a risk, dealing with a stranger. But she had fine references—said she was getting too old to run a hotel out in the desert—so she had moved to Phoenix. . . ."

HAMP ADAMS did not know what to say. It was true that Madam Fifi Gusto had moved to Phoenix, just ahead of a sheriff's posse investigating a killing under the roof of her establishment here in Ruby City. And her girls had left with her. . .

"I got no doubt," Hamp resumed slowly, "that you'll find the deed to the California Hotel in order. Only it wasn't a hotel, exactly. Fifi Gusto run a—well—a sporting house, a parlor house."

Sylvia sucked in a gasp. "You mean—in the red light district?"

Hamp turned brick color to the roots of his close-cropped sorrel hair.

"Miss Curtis," he said miserably, "she *was* the 'red light district!' Of course, you can make a respectable house out of the California. G'long, mules! Just because I can't cuss you out, don't take advantage of me!"

Sylvia Curtis remained rigidly silent during the time it took the wagon to top the ridge. Spread out on the sage flat below her was Ruby City, in all its decadent shabbiness.

The thrill of discovery was enough to change the girl's mood. Dominating the town's single street was the two-story brick hotel building of her picture postcard. Hamp Adams was pointing out other landmarks.

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"That tailing dump yonder is from the old Golden Poppy Mine—that's the tipple and shaft house yonder. They taken more than twenty million in high-grade gold out of that hole in the ground. Building with the red roof is the Golden West Saloon. Quite a place in its time. It's now run by Señor Vaspar, the gent who met the train . . . . yonder's the old borax road. See that dust cloud on the horizon?

"That'll be one of Nedau's ore trains moving south from the Cerro Gordo. He'll be camping in Ruby by tonight."

Adams' voice droned on, identifying various landmarks in the sprawl of abandoned shacks and adobes which made up Ruby City. Reaching the foot of the ridge, Generals Grant and Lee, without benefit of whip or profanity, broke into a jog-trot which forced Sylvia Curtis to cling to her escort's arm for support.

The girl was breathless when Adams finally swung his rig up in front of an adobe-walled, tarpaper-roofed building on the east flank of the town.

"What's this?" Sylvia inquired. "Your home?"

Adams shook his head, avoiding her questioning stare.

"No, ma'am. It's what is now known as the California Hotel. You'll see the sign painted on the other side of the house."

Sylvia stared at the building in dismay, taking in the unpainted false front, a front window with its glass knocked out and repaired with tacked-up gunnysacks; the sagging roof of the porch awning, the litter of tin cans and bottles in the weeds between the front steps and the ancient hitch-rack.

The girl finally came back to reality long enough to gasp out, "*This* isn't the California Hotel—that's the brick, building I showed you the picture of—two blocks up the street—"

Hamp shook his head. "Hate to be the one to bust the news to you, ma'am, but Madam Gusto showed you a picture of the *original* California Hotel, the way it looked forty-odd years ago. The brick bulding is now known as the Freighter's Rest. The only property Madam Gusto owned in Ruby is this building here."

SYLVIA passed a shaking hand over her eyes. Her world was collapsing about her shoulders, as the awareness that she had been swindled finally soaked through her confused mind. Hamp saw the girl pull herself erect, her jaw jutting defiantly.

"It—it *is* a hotel, isn't it? I mean, with rooms and beds and everything—"

Hamp Adams nodded. "Sure, it could be made into a hotel. But it would be competing with the Freighter's Rest. There ain't trade enough to support two hotels—not on the ore and borax freighting traffic Ruby depends on."

The girl's mouth lost some of its white compression.

"I'll open a restaurant," she said. "I'll draw the freighters my way with home-cooked biscuits and fried chicken and fresh pies."

Hamp Adams was quiet for a long moment. Finally he said in a subdued voice, "Might work, at that. We ain't got a eating house in town. Freighters cook their own chow, but they like to sleep between sheets on a good mattress after weeks of batching on the trail. You might salvage something out o' Madam Gusto's place at that."

Hamp gave the girl a hand down from the wagon and turned to unload her trunk. She removed a key from her reticule and was unlocking the rickety door of Madam Gusto's place when Hamp came up the weather-beaten porch steps.

Dismay held the girl stock-still as she got her first glimpse of the shabby interior of her new possession. Faded wallpaper sagged from walls and ceiling like half-healed scabs; cobwebs draped every window and the heated air was fetid with the odors of long weeks without ventilation.

Hamp placed the cantelback trunk on the floor and removed his battered Stetson.

"You'll need help cleaning up this boars' nest," he said gently. "I'll send a couple of Mexican girls over from Señora Mateo's to help you. Meanwhile I'll shag down to the Freighter's Rest and whip up a snack of bait for you."

"Bait?"

"Grub. Food. You must be hungry.

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And like I said, there ain't any eating house in town—outside of the free lunches Clede Vaspar serves in his barroom."

In the act of removing her aigrette hat and shaking out her brown curls, Sylvia paused. "You live at my rival hotel? Sooner or later, Mister Adams, you'll be registering at the California Hotel—mark my word on that."

Hamp did not return her gay smile.

"Fact is," he said sheepishly, "I—I'm your competition, I reckon, and I sort of hold all the aces ag'in you. I've owned the Freighter's Rest going on ten years now."

HAMP was glad to get away from Sylvia Curtis; he could not endure the sight of the tears which she could not hold back as the full realization of her disaster penetrated her mind.

Driving his mule wagon down the alley between the brick hotel building and Vaspar's saloon, Hamp was unhitching in the rear of the Freighter's Rest when he caught sight of big Ben Followell, Vaspar's bartender, crossing over from the rear of the Golden West.

Vaspar's shiny wagon, the bays still flanking its tongue, stood behind the saloon. Followell, grotesquely huge in his grimy bar apron, approached his neighbor with a dour cast of face which hinted trouble.

"Your boss had a beating coming, Ben," Hamp got in the first lick. "Don't stick your horns into the mess."

Followell shrugged. "I carried the boss inside and laid him out to sleep it off. I didn't know the details. Came over to ask you if our likker shipment was at the depot."

Relief touched Hamp Adams. He knew this Followell to be a killer, a knife expert, maybe an owlhooter holing up in this isolated desert community to avoid the attention of the law. An easygoing hombre, Hamp didn't want trouble with Ben Followell or anyone else.

"Your wet goods are waiting down at the freight shed, Ben. Clede and me had our little go-round before he could load up."

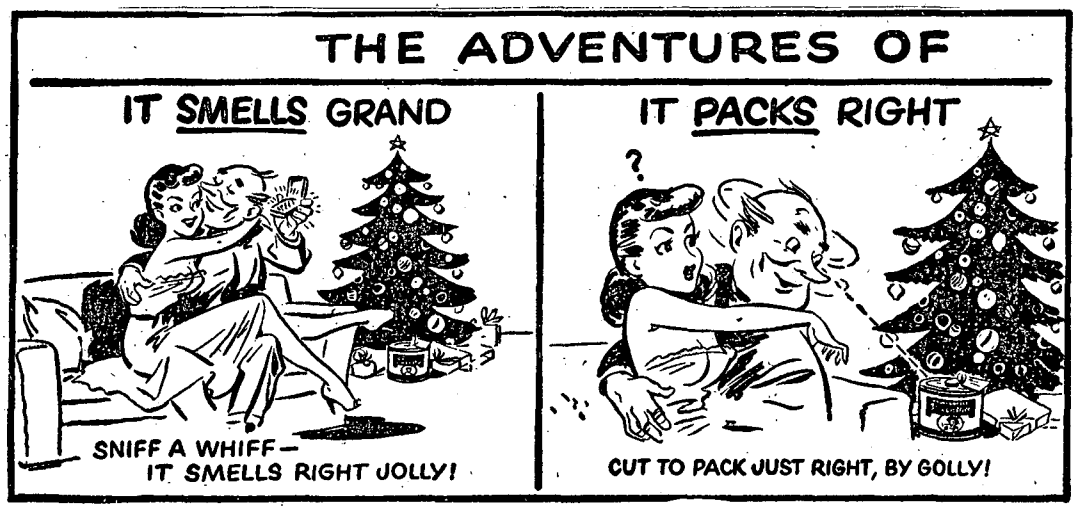
As Followell turned away, Adams called after him, "Ben—when Clede comes to he'll be drooping a horn. Maybe it would be best all around if you told him to leave things lie like they are. I ain't looking for trouble, but I ain't dodging it either."

Again Followell's gargantuan shoulders lifted and fell.

"The boss," he said evasively, "is a vindictive character. Whatever was between you and Clede is no business of mine."

On the face of it, Followell's words had been a declaration of neutrality; but there was an unvoiced threat in the barman's manner which did not escape Hamp. He thought morosely, *I ain't seen the last of trouble from that pair,* and led his mules out to the hotel stable.

He deferred unloading his freight with



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the happy excuse that he had to rustle up some victuals for Sylvia. Going into the kitchen which occupied the rear of the ground floor, he was jerked back to reality by the sight of Oatie Simmons and the old Santa Fe agent, Todd Hix, frying bacon and eggs at the stove.

The deputy marshal from Inyo County looked the part of a single-blanket prospector, a rawboned oldster in a ragged shirt and corduroy pants. At the moment, he and Hix were the hotel's only tenants. Hamp's business was sporadic, feast and famine, depending on the arrival of ore and borax trains.

After Hix had wolfed down his food and gone upstairs to his room, Simmons said thoughtfully, "You didn't ask any questions last night when I told you I was in town on a manhunt."

Hamp's fingers shook as he started cutting bread for sandwiches.

"Don't make a practise of butting into my customers' business, Oatie. But your news shook me up considerable."

Simmons went on with his meal, eating directly from the skillet. Hamp busied himself filling a tray with ham sandwiches, half a cantaloupe, a pitcher of cold milk, tomatoes from his vines out back and a jar of strawberry jam sent him by his Aunt Phoebe back in Mobile.

"A pity," grumbled the deputy marshal, "you don't furnish grub like that for your paying guests."

"This," Hamp said airily, "is a special favor for a person who prob'ly won't have another square meal while she's in town."

Covering the tray with a towel, Hamp strode to the back door and bawled "Primotivo! *Andale, muchacho!*" in a voice which brought an answering shout from a shack half a block distant.

INSIDE of a minute Primotivo Mateo, a ten-year-old Mexican youngster, came scampering up the rear steps, chattering "You got the *regaliz* candy for me, Señor Hamp? The *dulce* candy, *si?*"

"'Tivo," Hamp said, "you get a dime's worth of lickrish as soon as you fetch this tray of chow over to the young *damosela* at the California Hotel, savvy? When you get back, tell your ma to send Rosita and Constancia over there with mops and buckets to help the lady clean up the place."

The dusky-skinned little *niño* nodded and scurried off on his errand. When Hamp turned around, it was to see Oatie Simmons leaning back in his chair, wiping his gray scimitar of mustache and starting to pick his teeth with a watch-chain quill.

Hamp poured himself a beer mug of cold buttermilk from the cooler and went over to join the deputy marshal.

"You were saying, Oatie?" he prompted the dour-faced man.

"I'm working on a case for Panamint Silver," Oatie Simmons said. "I'm in-

[Turn page]

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vestigating a high-grading gang. Trying to plug a leak that has cost the syndicate better than half a million dollars in the past couple of years. The trail ends here in Ruby. Somebody pretty close to your daily life is headed for the pokey once I get my hands on him."

Hamp Adams whistled, eyeing Simmons over the rim of his beer mug. Drovers and swampers of the big Panamint Silver combine were among his steadiest customers here at the Freighter's Rest; he had catered to Panamint's trade for years, ever since he himself had been a driver in Panamint's employ, before switching to borax and the hotel business.

"There was some high-grading going on at the mines when I first went to work as a teamster," Hamp recalled. But the foremen overlooked it."

Simmons nodded moodily. "Small-time stuff. Muckers come out of a shaft at the end of their shift with a hunk of high-grade in their lunch bucket which they could swap at a bar for twice the wages they made during the day. That kind of high-grading, the big combines expect. But half a million dollars' loss in less than twenty months—that's grand larceny, Hamp. It's got to stop."

Hamp eyed the lawman thoughtfully. He knew what was on Oatie's mind. Every week, hundreds of tons of high-grade silver ore left the Panamints and Cerro Gordo mines, headed south across the desert by mule-team.

The ore haulers made fifteen miles a day, camping at water holes until they reached Ruby City, where they parked in the big corral behind Hamp's hotel and spent a couple of days resting up here in town, paying Hamp two dollars a night for the privilege of enjoying good mattresses and clean sheets.

Leaving Ruby, the wagon trains crawled over the San Bernardino mountains by way of Cajon Pass and eventually wound up at the seaport of San Pedro. There, the ore from California's mountain wastelands was loaded aboard steamers and shipped halfway around the world to the smelters in Swansea, Wales.

SOMEWHERE along the line, high-graders were dipping into those ore shipments. Oatie Simmons wouldn't be conducting an investigation here in Ruby City if he didn't have reason to believe the robberies were being committed at this stop. . . .

"What I'm driving at is this, Hamp," Oatie Simmons went on, glancing around to make sure they were alone. "It don't take much high-grade ore to add up to big money, being lifted out of a wagon chunk by chunk. We got detectives, posing as swampers or drivers, planted on some of Panamint's wagons. You know half a dozen of 'em by name, prob'ly. They sign your hotel book every trip through, passing to or from the mines."

Hamp's brows lifted. As Oatie had said, he knew most of Panamint's workmen by name. Knew their backgrounds, their hopes and aspirations, their frustrations and vices. The big freckle-faced hotel keeper was a kind of father-confessor to the desert drovers. And there wasn't a thief among them.

"I've got evidence," Simmons went on, "that this stealing is being done while the wagons stop over, here in Ruby. It ain't easy to lift ore out in the desert—say at Injun Wells or Pilot Knob or Black's Ranch—without leaving sign. It's being done in Ruby. My job is to catch the thieves in the act, with stolen ore for evidence to show in court. I aim to do so—and soon."

Hamp set his beer mug on the table and dried his lips with the back of his hand. Life, which had run along in such smooth channels for so many years, had suddenly become unpredictable. For a lazy man, the disruption loomed as untenable.

His thoughts drifted irrelevantly to the other upsetment in his easy way of life. Sylvia Curtis. Hoodwinked into buying a bawdy house, which she hoped to turn into a paying hotel. . . .

"You're going to ask me if I suspect any of Panamint's muleskinners of high-grading their own loads, Oatie?" he put the question point-blank to the salty oldster. "Or do you want me to help you spy for Panamint?"

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Simmons tilted his chair-legs back on the floor, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"Not exactly that," the deputy marshal said. "I do need your help. I know from talking to the supers at Panamint's diggings that you're a reliable man, who can be trusted to keep his mouth shut."

Hamp Adams said quietly, "This I can tell you here and now, Oatie. I know every drover on Panamint's payroll. I'd trust any man among 'em till hell freezes over. This high-grading isn't done in Ruby."

Simmons' gaze finally wavered under Hamp's stare. The lawman knew this man's loyalty to his patrons and respected Hamp for voicing it so unequivocally. But he had a fund of secret information which weeks of patient sleuthing had brought to light. . . .

"The high-grading," he said, "could be done by outsiders—men with knowledge of ore specimens. This I know for certain . . . the mineral is being stolen while Panamint's wagons are parked in your corral out back. I'll need your help in scouting those wagons at night."

Hamp relaxed slightly. "I wouldn't work against you, Oatie. You're free to go and come in my wagon yard as you wish, any time of day or night."

A smile touched the taut fixture of Oatie Simmons' lips under his shaggy mustache.

"What I want from you," the lawman said, "is the name of some family or some bachelor here in town who could put me up nights, so I wouldn't have to be seen coming or going from this building. Somebody you know is trustworthy to keep their mouth shut."

Hamp rubbed his jaw, totting off in his mind the few home-owners here in Ruby City. He could count them on the fingers of his two hands, and have some digits left over. A few prospectors maintained homes in Ruby, drifting in once or twice a year to get acquainted with their wives and kids. There was the Mateo family living in the old half-finished brewery building, and a Basque tribe whose menfolk ran sheep over in the Walker Pass country. . . .

Then Hamp had his inspiration. "Sylvia Curtis," he said, and went on to tell Oatie Simmons of the rival hotel which, even at this moment, was being readied for future customers.

"You can come and go from Madam Gusto's place without attracting any attention," Hamp pointed out. "And she aims to set up family-style meals—Miss Curtis, I mean."

Simmons got up to leave, good humor replacing the studied gravity of his expression.

"Bunking in a parlor house wasn't exactly in my plan," he chuckled, "but it'll work *bueno*—when do you expect a Panamint wagon string to show up?"

Hamp, remembering the dust-clouds on the northern horizon which he had pointed out to Sylvia this morning, said at once, "Joe Miles' outfit is due tonight. He runs his wagons into my yard and he always spends a couple days in Ruby, mending gear and other excuses to hang around Vaspar's saloon."

Simmons' head dipped. "Fine. I'll scout Miles' wagons from the time he drops trail until he pulls out for the canyon. And thanks for the knock-down to Señorita Curtis, son."

THAT evening at sundown, Joe Miles' wagon train, consisting of nine heavily-loaded silver-ore hitches from Cerro Gordo, pulled into their accustomed parking spot in the wagon yard behind the Freighter's Rest. Teams staked out for the night in the date-palm grove behind the hotel, the teamsters and swampers trooped into Hamp's place to engage their lodgings for the night, and then headed for Vaspar's saloon next door to buck the tiger and get drunk.

Tomorrow's dawn would find the ore freighters sleeping off their jags in their respective rooms upstairs; by dusk of the following day they would be on their plodding way toward the coast. And during the night, while their ore wagons were untended by their crews, Hamp Adams knew that grizzled old Oatie Simmons would be on watch in the wagon yard, unseen by any prowlers who might have been waiting here

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in Ruby for the treasure wagons to show up. . . .

That night Hamp turned in early, after debating the propriety of paying a visit to the California Hotel to see how Sylvia Curtis was coming along with her new venture. At least he had sent his rival hostelry its first paying customer. . . .

Hamp Adams slept undisturbed through the revelry from Vaspar's place next door; he was unaware of the noisy entrances of Panamint's wagon crews, staggering upstairs to their rooms from time to time.

The sun was just touching the eastern rim of the desert when Hamp was aroused by a violent pounding on the door of his personal living quarters off the Freighter's Rest lobby.

"Hamp—Mr. Adams! Wake up! Wake up—"

Adams bounced from his cot, the last residue of sleep vanished from him, as he recognized Sylvia Curtis' voice on the other side of the door.

"Coming, ma'am!" he called out, hastily stepping into his levis and reaching for his boots.

Hamp was buttoning on his shirt when he opened the door, to see Sylvia Curtis at the threshold. Her hair was done up in a red bandanna and her gingham frock was covered with an oilcloth apron.

"You get to work early," Hamp grinned. "Me, I always—"

He broke off, seeing the wildness in her eyes.

"Hamp—Mr. Adams—that nice old man you sent over to my hotel yesterday—"

"Oatie Simmons. He skip without paying the rent, ma'am?"

She hurried on, "I opened a window next to his room to shake out my dust-mop in the alley. Oh, Mr. Adams—it was awful. Mr. Simmons is lying in the alley under his room window—"

Hamp threw back his head and laughed. "Now don't you get worked up about that, ma'am. Not in Ruby. Oatie got in late, most likely, and too drunk to crawl through the window. He's sleeping it off. I'll go put him to bed for you. Do it all the time with my own customers."

Sylvia buried her face in her hands. A shudder wracked her body.

"Poor Mr. Simmons isn't drunk," she whispered. "He's dead. He's got a—a butcher knife sticking out of his back. Somebody killed him last night, Mr. Adams!"

WHEN Hamp and Sylvia reached the California Hotel, there was no one abroad on Ruby City's main street. The girl went at once indoors rather than follow Hamp into the adjacent alley.

Oatie Simmons' body lay sprawled face down on the hard adobe under an open hotel window, a death-stiffened corpse which Sylvia—in spite of the shock and horror of her grisly discovery—had tarried to cover over with a faded quilt. There was a ghastly hump making a little conical tent over the lawman's shoulders, where the soogan was supported by a knife handle.

A queasy sensation in his stomach, Hamp squatted beside the motionless shape and drew back the quilt. The weapon Sylvia had described as a butcher knife was a Mexican *cuchillo* with a purple bone haft set with turquoise. Eight inches of steel had been plunged into the deputy marshal's back between his shoulder blades.

Thus had Oatie Simmons' manhunt ended. . . .

Killer must have been waiting for him and got him as he was crawling backwards out of the window, Hamp deduced, scanning the roundabout alley for sign and seeing nothing. Somebody who knew he'd changed hotels. Oatie probably waited for dark before heading for my wagon yard to scout. . . .

Back in a dresser drawer at the Freighter's Rest, Hamp Adams had a badge making him a deputy sheriff of San Bernardino County. He had never had to exercise his legal authority in Ruby since being sworn in three years ago. The only trouble spot in town was Vaspar's saloon, and bartender Ben Followell, the bouncer, was more than capable of handling trouble in the Golden West.

Now Hamp had a murder victim on his hands, and that came under his jurisdiction

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—not only the legal disposal of Oatie Simmons' remains, but the task of tracking down his unknown killer. For an easygoing hombre like Hamp, the prospect was appalling.

He had a motive to start working on, though. From his brief talk with Simmons yesterday in the hotel kitchen, Hamp Adams had gleaned valuable, if incomplete information accounting for Simmons' presence in Ruby City. No one else in town, he was sure, knew the deputy U. S. marshal was here to investigate the activities of an organized high-grading gang. No one, that is, but himself—and obviously, the man who had stabbed Oatie to death. . . .

Simmons' holstered Colt still rested in its holster. The knife, distinctive as it was, offered no tangible clue, being a type which the Ruby Mercantile sold by the dozen to its Mexican trade; Hamp himself had an exact duplicate of this weapon among his kitchen cutlery at the Freighter's Rest.

A strike of boots, grating in the alley behind him, made Hamp wheel around on his haunches. He had not bothered to belt on a gun when he had hurried away from his room with Sylvia a few minutes ago; now, staring into the beady, questioning eyes of gambler Clede Vaspar, he wished he had.

Vaspar came up the alley, his eyes fixed wonderingly on the half-covered corpse beside Adams. He was wearing his black steel-pen coat and buckskin-foxed pants; he gave off the stale odors of tobacco and whisky which he had absorbed during long hours at the Golden West's poker table during the past night.

The gambler's expression did not change as he recognized the dead man lying with his left cheek pressed against the earth. He licked his lips once and said softly, "Why, it's old man Simmons. Played cards in my place regularly. When did this happen, Hamp?"

Adams came slowly to his feet.

"Sun's barely up, and you're on the snoop," he said suspiciously. "How come, Clede? You usually bed down daytimes."

The gambler shrugged. "I chanced to see you and Miss Curtis on the street. I came over to offer my apologies for our little misunderstanding down at the depot yesterday—to you and to her. I did not intend to be ungentlemanly."

The Mule Team

ADAMS scratched his head. He would have liked to have kept Simmons' murder secret from the town; but it was too late for that now. Ignoring Vaspar's humility, Adams said, "Miss Curtis is too upset over this nasty business here to see you, Clede. Go on back to your saloon."

Vaspar's grin widened. "I could tell you to go to hell, Hamp. You can't stop me from seeing her."

Adams' cheeks took on a high flush of color. "You dragged a hideout gun on me yesterday, Clede. I could put you under arrest for that, if I wanted, and lug you over to San Berdoo. Don't crowd me."

Vaspar's defiant attitude vanished in-

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stantly. He glanced down at the dead man.

"Why would anybody stick a knife in a harmless old prospector like Simmons?" the gambler asked, half to himself.

Adams' eyes narrowed speculatively. He was remembering what Oatie had hinted to him yesterday—that outsiders were back of the high-grading here in Ruby. Clede Vaspar was an outsider if there ever was one. But he didn't fit the part of a high-grader; that called for a man with mining knowledge.

"Maybe," Adams suggested, "Simmons hit it rich. Maybe he was killed by a claim-jumper."

Vaspar shook his head. "Doubt that. This country's mined out. Besides, Simmons never flashed a nugget or a poke of dust at my place. He lived on Civil War pension checks."

Adams covered over the deputy marshal's body and ushered Vaspar back to the street. Without further argument, the gambler turned and headed toward the Golden West.

Staring after him, Adams was startled by the sound of Sylvia Curtis' voice, close behind him. The girl had emerged from the hotel without his notice.

"Mrs. Mateo told me you're a deputy sheriff, Mister Bates," Sylvia said. "It's your responsibility to check into this. I can't have men being murdered under my roof—not if I'm to make a go of this hotel."

Hamp turned slowly to meet the flashing temper in Sylvia's eyes. He grinned bleakly.

"Wouldn't do your hotel rep any good," he admitted.

"Do you," she demanded, "have any idea who did it? He hadn't slept in his bed last night—the covers were turned back just as I prepared them for him. He was such a nice old man—"

Hamp said slowly, "I'm a deputy sheriff, yes, but I ain't had much practise at detectiving. Being frank, I ain't got the least idea who done Oatie in. And you made so many tracks around the body, I—"

Sylvia said quickly, "There were no clues. I looked for them. The ground is hard-packed adobe, hard as rock. If the killer didn't leave any tracks, neither did I, Mister Adams."

Hamp was relieved to see a glint of humor in her eyes, taking some of the sting from her words.

"Wish you'd call me Hamp. Short for Hampshire. Ain't used to being mistered."

Some of the exasperation left Sylvia's face.

"Well," she said, "we can't just stand here. What do you propose to do? We can't leave that poor old man lying in that alley—"

Hamp consulted his watch. "There'll be a train through in forty minutes. I'll flag 'er down and take Oatie's remains to the coroner in San Berdoo. Only thing I can do."

Sylvia countered instantly, "If you admit you can't track down clues, why not telegraph the sheriff and the coroner to come here?"

Hamp shook his head. "No telegraph. No. Bodies don't keep in this climate, ma'am. And I got no authority to bury him."

"You can call me Sylvia. I'm not used to being ma'amed."

Hamp grinned. "I'll take Oatie to the county seat. And listen: don't lose any sleep about this thing. We ain't had a killing in town since—well, since there was a shooting here in the California Hotel last winter. Madam Gusto had to leave town in a hurry over that one. That's why you met her in Phoenix. If she's still there, the sheriff will be interested to know that, I reckon."

Sylvia's jaw dropped. "She was such a kindly old lady . . . but since this swindle she pulled on me, I can believe anything about her. I doubt very much if she is still in Phoenix, Hamp. She had two thousand dollars of my money to travel on. That could take her a long way."

Hamp went back to the Freighter's Rest and hitched up his mule wagon. Primotivo Mateo was on hand, shoveling manure to pick up some pin money, and Hamp sent him over to tell his mother to have one of the older girls stay with Sylvia for the next week or so.

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ENTERING the hotel, Hamp changed quickly into his Sunday duds. The man who was his assistant, old Todd Hix, was getting himself a pot of coffee on to boil when Hamp came through the kitchen on his way to the stable. Hix was nominally the local freight agent for the Santa Fe Railroad, who paid for his room in the Freighter's Rest by serving as janitor and manager in Hamp's rare absences.

A hardrock miner most of his life, Todd Hix was on the shelf now as a result of a mining accident which had damaged his spine. He was always unhappiest while preparing a meal indoors, claiming it reminded him that his prospecting days were forever over.

"Todd, I'm catching the 8:40 for San Berdoo," Hamp explained. "Official business. Might be gone two-three days. You're in charge of the hogan till I get back."

Hix grunted, busy stoking the range grate with 'squite wood.

"Hauling Simmons to the morgue?"

Hamp was startled. "How'd you find that out? Vaspar been shooting off his big mouth so soon?"

Hix colored, turning back to the woodbox. "Overheard the young lady telling you the news. Any idea who owns that knife?"

Hamp said impatiently, "You're always eavesdropping, Todd. . . . I'll let the coroner figger out that knife business. While I'm gone, keep your lip close-hobbled about Simmons."

Hix said grumpily, "Suppose you want me to traipse down to the depot and flag the 8:40 for you—"

"I'll 'tend to that myself. You can pick up the mules and wagon later on this morning. Mind you don't forget 'em."

Ruby City's street was still deserted when Hamp Adams drove his buckboard out of the hotel alley. Clede Vaspar was seated on his saloon porch next door, manicuring his nails.

"Clede," Hamp called out, halting the mules, "I'm leaving town for a day or two. I got some orders to leave with you."

Vaspar looked up, his hooded eyes inscrutably hostile.

"The California Hotel," Hamp went on, "is out of bounds to you. Miss Curtis don't want any apologies."

Vaspar said quietly, "The orders, Hamp?"

"Damn it, I just gave 'em to you. If Sylvia tells me you been pestering around, I'll run you out of town on a rail when I get back. I ain't joshing you, Clede."

Hamp whipped the Generals into a reluctant trot, turning finally into the alley between the California Hotel and a boarded-up assay office. Sighting the dead man, the mules shied.

Sylvia was not in evidence when Hamp lifted Oatie Simmons' board-stiff remains gingerly into the buckboard, covered it with the quilt, and, hearing the 8:40's two-mile whistle coming across the eastern desert, drove off without seeing the girl.

He had a prescience that Sylvia wouldn't be here when he got back. Her hotel business was doomed from the start; Freighter's Rest was too well entrenched for competition to get a toehold here.

Hamp's heart was heavy for another reason. The sheriff in San Berdoo would rawhide him for not checking the ownership of the Mexican knife. But Hamp's mind was already made up to one thing: he'd resign his deputy sheriffship and the responsibility that went with it. Wasn't worth the penny-ante salary the job paid.

But Ruby would seem lonesome, with Sylvia gone. . . .

TWO days later Hamp Adams was hopping off a through freight at Ruby City station, still in possession of his deputy's badge and the obligations it entailed. Shucking his job with an unsolved murder on the books couldn't be done, Hamp had discovered.

Arriving in San Bernardino, Hamp had turned Oatie Simmons' body over to the deputy coroner at the morgue and, thinking his part in the affair was finished, hurried straightaway to Sheriff Blaine Pursley's office in the jail building, with every intention of emerging therefrom a free agent, an ex-deputy. When he had accepted the job, he hadn't forseen the detective angle.

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To his discomfiture, he found Sheriff Blaine Pursley absent in line of duty. San Bernardino County, California, was the largest county in the forty-eight states and as such was equal in area to Massachusetts and Connecticut combined. At the moment Sheriff Pursley was somewhere in Los Angeles on county business and could not be contacted by his office. The jailer on duty was not authorized to accept any deputy's resignation.

The coroner had read Hamp the riot act from a sick bed where he was recuperating from a severe attack of asthma—a malady which prevented that official from investigating any murder cases in the Mojave Desert, this time of year especially.

"You're the sworn representative of law and order in Ruby City, Adams!" the coroner had reminded him testily. "I'll notify Simmons' office in Inyo County, and maybe the government will send another deputy down to investigate. When he arrives, you damn' better have some evidence lined up against Simmons' killer or you might find yourself in the pen for malfeasance in office."

Dusk had turned the surrounding desert purple and gold when Hamp Adams trudged his way over the ridge and down to Ruby City's outskirts.

For the first time since he could remember, the town looked different. The change, he saw on second glance, was the presence of twenty-odd borax and silver wagons, usually parked in his corral behind the Freighter's Rest, now drawn up in ragged phalanxes on the opposite corner of town—behind Sylvia Curtis' newly-opened California Hotel.

The sight was enough to jolt from Hamp's mind, momentarily at least, the murder investigation he was saddled with. Why should his long-time customers park so far from the Freighter's Rest? It wasn't a matter of getting free corral space for their wagons during their Ruby City stopover, for Hamp threw in his wagon yard free of charge for paying hotel customers. . . .

Arriving at the Freighter's Rest, Hamp went immediately to the visitor's register hanging from a ceiling post in the lobby and thumbed through the dog-eared volume to check up on how business had gone during his absence.

To his astonishment, no guests had signed the book since he had turned the management over to Todd Hix. The intervening time had been a dead loss so far as business was concerned.

Hamp tossed his carpetbag into his room and stalked out back to the kitchen. As usual at this hour of the evening, Todd Hix was rustling up a bait of grub for himself.

"How's business?" Hamp demanded, making no mention of the fact he had checked on the register.

Todd Hix looked up from the job of champing an ear of buttered corn, wiped his brindle whiskers and replied dourly, "Ain't been none since you left, kid."

Hamp planted fists akimbo on hips and glared down at the old Santa Fe station agent.

"No business? The town's jammed with wagon outfits. I seen 'em parked over behind the assay office coming down the ridge just now."

Todd Hix shrugged. "Behind the Californy Hotel, you mean. That filly you befriended has cleaned your plow behind your back, kid. Her place is crowded to overflowin'."

Hamp sat down shakily, running a hand over his moist brow. In ten years he had not faced an iota of competition for the freighters' trade. Now overnight his rival was threatening him with bankruptcy. He hadn't reckoned on the power of a pretty face.

"There's only one answer to that," Hamp Adams ground out. "And it won't last very long. Sylvia Curtis is cutting rates. She'll go bust trying to underbid me."

Todd Hix went back to his eating.

"Wrong guess, son. We charged two bucks a bunk per night. She's gettin' three—and turning away customers. Them that come here wanting rooms, I quoted three bucks, same as the Californy. They told me to soak my head and spread their soogans under their wagons like on the trail."

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Hamp Adams' head swam. Cut-rate competition he could understand, but for notoriously tight-fisted wagoneers to patronize a rival hotel that charged three dollars a night—

Hungry as he was, Adams had no appetite for his own food. He stamped out of the hotel and five minutes later stalked into the California Hotel.

He found the lobby turned into a dining room, the tables jammed with freighters fresh off the desert. Most of them Hamp had known for ten years or longer, yet not one voice was raised in greeting as he entered. His arrival was lost in a general bedlam of conversation and laughter, rattling chinaware and tin cups.

RECOVERING from this blow, Hamp was astonished to see the changes which Sylvia Curtis had wrought; with the help of Señora Mateo and her girls, in three brief days. Gone was the shoddy wallpaper; the room gleamed now with fresh whitewash. There were gay calico curtains at the windows; the floor was stripped of its ancient linoleum and its boards now gleamed like a ship's deck.

And then he saw Sylvia.

Clad in a form-fitting gingham frock, her glossy hair done up in a neat chignon, the girl's face was flushed as she emerged from the hotel kitchen, bearing aloft a tray of fried chicken. Placing the platter on the nearest table, Sylvia came at once to where Hamp Adams stood glowering in the doorway.

"There isn't room in the dining hall right now, Hamp," the girl said, squeezing his hand. "You come out back and I'll fix you up. Mrs. Mateo furnished the friers, if you're wondering."

Hamp, his presence still utterly ignored by his erstwhile customers, made his way back to the kitchen where he found Señora Mateo busy cooking tortillas. Hamp seated himself at a neatly-scrubbed table and before he could think up an adequate comment, Sylvia Curtis had placed before him succulent cuts of golden-brown chicken, a quarter watermelon, buttered potatoes, a steaming cup of the most delicious coffee he had ever tasted, home-made biscuits and copious helpings of vegetables.

He had no opportunity to talk with the girl; she was too busy helping Rosita Mateo with her waitress duties. Finishing his meal in disgruntled silence, Hamp was placing a shiny silver dollar beside his plate when Sylvia came in with a tray of dishes.

"Hamp—put that money back in your pocket!" Sylvia exclaimed. "It's on the house. I wouldn't think of charging you for a bite of food under my roof!"

Hamp added a second dollar.

"No dice," he grumbled. "It was a fine meal, I'll grant you that. But I ain't accepting charity—even though I should, getting my livelihood cut out from under me behind my back."

Sylvia picked up the two silver dollars and quietly dropped the coins back in his shirt pocket.

"I can't accept payment," she said pertly, "because it would violate the number one rule of this house, sir."

"Meanin' what?"

"Meals served at the California Hotel are free of charge."

Hamp gulped. "Come off! How you expect to make money that way?"

Sylvia slipped her arm through his and marched him back down the corridor to the noisy dining room. There she pointed to a neatly-lettered sign over the doorway. It read:

MEALS SERVED ONLY TO
HOTEL GUESTS
THE MANAGEMENT

Hamp Adams' jaw flapped open like a trout's. This, then, was the secret of Sylvia Curtis' competition. Hairy-eared wagon drivers and swampers, fresh from the bake-oven of Death Valley and the waterless miles of the desert trails, would pawn their souls for cooking such as Hamp had just enjoyed. But in order to get it, they had to book rooms at the California Hotel—at fifty percent more than the Freighter's Rest was charging.

Hamp was only vaguely aware that Sylvia was propelling him toward the door. Out in the cool dusk, he heard Sylvia's ban-

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tering words: "No room, no food. It's simple. Rent a room overnight and get breakfast and supper thrown in. You could do the same at the Freighter's Rest, Hamp. If you weren't too lazy to cook, that is."

The girl seated herself on a porch bench and began fanning herself with a newspaper. In the twilight gloom, her eyes were sparkling saucily as she looked up at the big man. Then her face went grave.

"Did the—sheriff come back with you from San Bernardino, Hamp? To investigate Mr. Simmons' murder?"

HAMP shook his head, wondering why the revelry inside the dining room seemed meant to taunt his ears alone. He heard Rosita squeal and giggle as some muleskinner pinched her. A voice he recognized as John Scroggins', one of his steady customers at the Freighter's Rest, was demanding another helping of tortillas.

"The county," he said stiffly, "figgers nobody can track down that knifer but me, Sylvia. I aim to start work on the case pronto. First thing in the morning."

Sylvia was instantly on her feet.

"Will you always put things off, Hamp? I've been working on the thing. I've found out who owned that murder knife."

Hamp wheeled around, startled speechless.

"It belonged to Señora Mateo," Sylvia said. "At least, it did if there was an initial carved on the blade—"

Hamp nodded miserably. "There was. Letter P. The deputy coroner pointed that out to me, to work on."

"That initial," Sylvia said, "stands for Providencia—Señora's first name. The knife was a Christmas gift from her late husband."

Hamp's head reeled. Now that Sylvia brought the matter to his attention, he recalled having seen the murder knife—or a knife identical to it—in young Primotivo's possession, last winter. He had taken the *cuchillo* away from the kid when he found 'Tivo carving his initials on the hotel bannister.

"Now what reason would a nice old Spanish lady like Missus Mateo have for stabbing a man to death?" Adams blurted out.

Sylvia stamped her foot. "You can be incredibly dense at times, Hampshire Adams. She didn't stab Mr. Simmons. The knife was stolen from her kitchen, weeks and weeks ago. At least it proves the murderer was a Ruby City resident, not an outsider."

Hamp Adams remained silent. After a pause, Sylvia went on, "I'm not so sure the county did the right thing, entrusting a murder investigation to you, Hamp Adams. From what I've been able to learn, you're the laziest specimen in this town. No get-up-and-go. No initiative."

Hamp said stiffly, "I've made a paying thing of the hotel since I took it over ten years ago."

Sylvia laughed without mirth. "That, my lackadaisical friend, is a thing of the past. As soon as I can afford it I intend to build an annex across the alley and convert that assay office into hotel accomodations."

Anger, not unmixed with a deep sense that the girl was not merely boasting, stormed through Hamp Adams.

"Thanks," he said, "for the free grub. I've had a hard day. I aim to turn in. At least the Rest will be quiet tonight."

Sylvia reached out to seize his arm.

"Listen, Hamp Adams. I tried to needle you into displaying some gumption and you won't even be insulted. I told you where that murder knife came from. Aren't you going to check on it?"

Hamp spread his arms despairingly. "Missus Mateo's knife was stolen weeks ago, you said, and you expect me to track down whoever stole it, and arrest him for murder. Talk sense or keep quiet, woman."

Sylvia folded her arms across her breasts and said archly, "I don't intend to see you fumble a murder case. I have a theory as to who stole that knife. I'll give you the chance to track down that theory and hog all the credit."

Hamp was breathing hard. Damn it, there was no out-foxing this girl. She was two jumps ahead of him at every turn.

"It is my theory," Sylvia went on in an adamant whisper, "and a theory that Señora Mateo concurs in, that her little boy

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Primotivo stole that knife and sold it. Find out who 'Tivo sold it to—and perhaps, but not necessarily, you've got the killer."

Hamp Adams said huffily, "I bid you good-night, ma'am," and stalked off down the empty street toward an even emptier two-story brick hotel building. He heard Sylvia slam the screen door loudly as she returned to her diners.

OUT from under the girl's sarcastic presence, Hamp did some tall thinking. Wouldn't put it past Primotivo Mateo to chouse his mother's favorite butcher knife, at that, to peddle it for a few nickels to buy licorice with. Hamp's brand-new stable fork had disappeared, to turn up later at the Last Chance Livery Barn, swapped for a quarter. Licorice sticks were to Primotivo what opium was to a dope fiend; he had to have the black candy or go berserk.

Bypassing the Freighter's Rest, in the lobby of which Todd Hix had lighted a night lamp which would not be needed by his customers on their way upstairs, Hamp went directly to the old brewery where Providencia Mateo and her Mexican brood made their home.

He found six of the little Mateos sleeping peacefully in their cribs, but Primotivo was not among them. The little scamp could be anywhere, this early in the evening. . . .

Back in his stable shed grooming his mules, Hamp Adams banished any hope of getting to sleep that night and devoted his thinking to the impossible task which lay ahead—tracking down Oatie Simmons' murderer.

At the moment of his death, the Marshal had undoubtedly been on his way to Hamp's wagon yard, to secret himself somewhere in the vicinity and spend the night spying for a possible visit by ore thieves.

Oatie Simmons' words burned in Hamp's memory now: *"I've got evidence that this high-grading is being done while the wagons stop over here in Ruby City . . . My job is to catch the thieves in the act. I aim to do so, soon. . . ."*

Suddenly, like a bright flash of light in his head, Hamp knew what he must do. Oatie Simmons had blueprinted the thing for him in advance. If high-graders were looting wagons here in Ruby City, they would continue to do so. The obvious thing to do was maintain a lookout on the parked wagons and catch the thief or thieves in the act. . . .

He would be bucking a killer, maybe more than one killer. Once cornered, a high-grader would fight for his life. But it had to do done.

On his way into the hotel to pick up his gun, Hamp Adams knew that solving Oatie Simmons' murder was a secondary thing now. More than outwitting the high-graders was at stake. His own pride was in the balance, his own self-respect. Or, to put it bluntly, Sylvia's faith in him.

Maybe she was right; maybe he was a lazy bum, taking the line of least resistance through life. Maybe he was devoid of gumption and drive and ambition. To prove Sylvia wrong, Hamp knew he would buck flaming guns in the night, flashing knives like the one that had plunged Oatie Simmons into eternity.

It was either that or leave Ruby City forever, licked and discredited. And where in the wide world would he find a paradise to compare with Ruby City even if he succeeded in running away from his own conscience?

IN THE PRIVACY of his room on the ground floor of the Freighter's Rest, Hamp Adams pawed around in a closet until he located the coiled shell belt and holstered Frontier model .45 sixgun which had been gathering dust there for years.

Owning a gun had been one of the requisites of drawing a deputy sheriff's pay. The Colt he now examined behind drawn window shades was a well-balanced, thickly greased model. He had accepted it in payment for a week's lodgings from some wayfarer whose name he had long since forgotten.

Buckling on the cartridge belt, Hamp jacked open the Colt and cleaned it carefully, dry-snapping the hammer a few times to get the feel of the weapon. It fit

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his outsized palm as if it was growing there.

The cartridges in the belt loops were green with corrosion. Hamp made his way out in the lobby and rummaged around in a drawer of the desk where he kept his business papers, remembering an unused box of ammunition some tenant had left behind. They were .45s.

Back in his room, Hamp loaded the gun except for an empty chamber under the firing pin. He practised a few times, drawing. He was incredibly slow. Arms and ammunition had had no part in his easy-going existence up to now. If he succeeded in trapping a high-grader in the wagon lot behind the California Hotel, tonight or tomorrow night or next week or next month, he knew he would be facing a man with greased lightning in his gun arm. . . .

Hamp blew out the lamp and stretched himself out on the bed to rest. Next door, the usual pandemonium was going on in Clede Vaspar's barroom, as the freighters trooped over from Sylvia's place to get drunk and buck Vaspar's games.

The Freighter's Rest, by contrast, was unbearably quiet. Hamp heard old Todd Hix thumping around in his room over the kitchen, then come down the stairs and make his way toward the saloon next door. Whatever pay the Santa Fe Railroad shelled out to Hix eventually found its way into Ben Followell's bar till.

It was Hamp's fixed habit, just before retiring at ten o'clock, to drop in at the Golden West for a nightcap. It would not do to break that routine now; it would be noticed by his old cronies.

At a quarter to ten, Hamp slipped on a ducking jumper to conceal the fact that he was carrying a gun. But no, that wouldn't wash; the night was suffocating after a summer day when the thermometer had hovered around 120 in the shade.

He removed belt and gun, tucked them under his pillow, hung up the jumper and left the hotel.

Pushing open the batwings of the Golden West, Hamp tried to appear his usual casual, happy-go-lucky self as he peered through the swimming layers of smoke which filled the barroom.

Clede Vaspar, immaculate in white linen and black fustian, was presiding over a poker game in a far corner. Todd Hix was running the roulette wheel tonight, as he often did, receiving his pay in free whisky. Behind the long mahogany bar, pock-marked with the cavities from which silver dollars had long since been plucked out of the wood, big Ben Followell was dispensing beer and hard liquor to his customers.

A BEWHISKERED old desert wagoneer, John Scroggins, who whacked mules for the Panamint Silver people and whose wagons were parked tonight back of the California Hotel, came weaving over to where Ben Followell was sliding a bottle and shot glass toward Adams.

"Hamp, ol' friend," hiccoughed the muleskinner, "I got the miseries. My belly feels like a pair o' wildcats were clawin' each other tryin' to git up my gullet."

Adams caught Followell's wink and waggled his finger for another glass. At sight of it, Scroggins drew himself up stiffly.

"It ain't a drink I'm cadgin' tonight, Hamp ol' friend," the wagoneer said thickly. "I've already had a couple of snorts and it don't set well on the watermelon an' fried chicken I indulged in."

Scroggins was obviously in bad shape, doubled over and rubbing his stomach feebly. Under ordinary circumstances, it would be Hamp's duty to get the old man over to the hotel and to bed, to sleep off his binge.

"Hamp ol' friend," Scroggins went on, "you ain't holdin' it ag'in me for switchin' ho-tels, be you? It's the chow that gal serves that influenced me, nothin' else a-tall."

Ben Followell leaned across the bar and said *sotto voce* to Hamp, "Better hustle him to bed, Hamp. Old John gets mean when he feels sick. Tried to shoot out the bar glass last time he felt this way. I'd be obliged—"

Hamp nodded, gulped down a swallow of night cap, dropped a quarter on the bar and turned to John Scroggins.

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"I'll see you home, John," Adams said gently, taking the muleskinner's arm. "You'll feel better in the morning."

Surprisingly, Scroggins made no objection. The man seemed obviously ill. On their way to the street door, Clede Vaspar looked up from the act of raking in a stack of multi-colored poker chips and called out, "Don't let him wake up in the Freighter's Rest, tomorrow, Hamp, or Scroggins will be fit to be tied. He's already paid for a bunk over at the California."

Scroggins mumbled profanity as Hamp half-dragged, half-carried him through the batwings. Instead of turning next door to Scroggins' accustomed room in the Freighter's Rest, Hamp headed dutifully down the street toward the glow of lighted windows marking Sylvia Curtis' place.

They were well away from the Golden West, slogging through ankle-deep silver dust, when Scroggins' weight suddenly left Hamp's arm and he came to a stop.

"I ain't drunk, son," Scroggins said in a steady voice. "I wanted to talk to you, you being the deputy sheriff who lugged Oatie Simmons over to the coroner the other day."

Hamp halted, realizing that Scroggins had been far out on the desert at the time of Simmons' tragedy. The tenor of his words just now indicated that Scroggins was aware of Simmons' status as a lawman.

"It was a sad thing, that innocent old rock-hound," Hamp said.

"Rock-hound, hell!" Scroggins retorted. "Oatie Simmons was a Deputy U.S. Marshal. And I ain't the muleskinner you may think me to be, Hamp. I'm a Pinkerton man. Here's my badge for proof."

Hamp's heart raced as he felt Scroggins press a metal shield against his palm. In the starlight there was no questioning the authenticity of the badge.

"You're one of the detectives Panamint has planted on its wagon crews to check on high-grading," Hamp said. "Oatie told me about that, the day he was killed."

Scroggins grunted with satisfaction.

"Now we know where we stand, then. What I wanted to tell you, son, is that the Cerro Gordo mines are petering out fast. Won't be many more loads of high-grade moving through Ruby. But this trip, I'm hauling ore worth its weight in silver at the mint. If Simmons was right in thinking the high-graders work here in Ruby, I got a hunch my wagons will be hit between now and the time I shove off at dawn."

Hamp nodded grimly. "I aim to roost all night in that wagon yard, John. You're more than welcome to join me."

JOHN SCROGGINS shook his head. "Can't do 'er, son. I'm sharing a room with five other hombres. The way things stand, a man can't tell who is a friend and who ain't. Wouldn't do for me to turn up missing. Might tip off my hand—in case I'm bunking in the same room with a high-grader."

"Simmons thinks the thieves are outsiders."

"I know. And Oatie knew his business. Too bad he was so close-mouthed. Never tipped off any of us as to how the case was proceding, except we knew he'd run up against something hot here in Ruby."

When they reached the California Hotel, Scroggins was acting the role of a sick drunk as they headed down the alley where Oatie Simmons had met his death. At a rear fire-escape stairway, the old man forced Adams to carry him up to the second story corridor.

When they were inside the cot-crowded room Scroggins had engaged, the detective whispered, "My wagon with the rich stuff in it is the new-painted red Conestoga in the southwest corner of the lot. Hide out where you can keep an eye on that wagon, kid. Luck."

Hamp shuddered. "Thanks, John. I may need a lot of luck."

Hamp Adams left the California Hotel by the outside fire escape, cutting across lots before crossing Main Street. Entering the Freighter's Rest, Hamp blew out the lobby lamp as a precaution against possible spying eyes, and went to his room to get his belt and gun from under the pillow.

He slipped out of the building by the rear kitchen door. Across the night he could

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hear young Primotivo Mateo singing *La Paloma* at the top of his lungs. He was tempted to pay the Mexican kid a visit and follow through on the lead Sylvia had given him regarding the *cuchillo* which had killed Oatie Simmons.

But that would be a waste of time, tonight. Primotivo would swear his innocence, naturally, even if he had purloined the knife from his mother's kitchen and sold it to someone here in town. The truth could eventually be bribed from him, with licorice sticks, but the only available source of the ransom would be the general store, locked at this hour, its proprietor being one of the revelers at the Golden West.

Cutting a wide circle of the town's south side, Hamp Adams worked his way back toward the ore and borax wagons assembled behind Sylvia Curtis' hotel. There would be no moon tonight, but the stars were bright enough for him to pick out John Scroggins' red wagon, laden with four tons of silver ore bound for an overseas smelter.

That wagon, old Scroggins believed, would be the target of a high-grade theft tonight. The theory tied in with Oatie Simmons' investigation. In a way, Hamp Adams was carrying on for the martyred deputy marshal tonight. . . .

He found himself a vantage point under the tarpaulin which covered a tanker caboose behind a tandem-hitched pair of wagons filled with crude Death Valley borax. Scroggins' silver wagon was the next in line, the starshine glinting off its eight-inch-wide wagon tires.

A MAN could climb up on that wagon with a gunny sack and in five minutes' time, filch enough ore specimens to net himself half a thousand dollars. Here in frontier California, crooked assayers asked no questions about the ownership of high-grade ore samples shipped to them for sale. The flourishing traffic in stolen mineral had cost Panamint Syndicate half a million dollars in less than two years, Oatie Simmons had said. . . .

The stars wheeled their inexorable course across the heavens as Hamp hunkered down for his vigil, peering out from under the canvas caboose cover. The weight of the Colt .45 was comforting on his thigh.

He saw the lights go out one by one in the California Hotel; he heard Sylvia Curtis' musical voice bidding good-night in rusty Spanish, lately acquired, to her helpers, Señora Mateo and young Rosita. The Mexican women, having finished cleaning up the dishes, were on their way across town to their home in the old brewery.

The clock in the old Miners' Bank building chimed the hour of midnight, and an eternity later, one o'clock. It was around two when the first of Clede Vaspar's revelers began drifting back to the California Hotel, filling the building with their rude shouts as they scrambled upstairs to bed.

Hamp's muscles began to cramp. The night was unearthly quiet, as only a night in the desert can be quiet. An owl or two winged by overhead, briefly seen against the Milky Way as they foraged for insects; somewhere across town a dog yapped.

The nickelodeon over at the Golden West went silent after having played *Buffalo Gals* without interruption for six hours, which meant the saloon had finally closed. Todd Hix would be weaving his drunken way back to his room in the Freighter's Rest: Vaspar and his barkeeper, Followell, would be retiring to their living quarters in the back end of the deadfall, not to emerge again until sundown tomorrow.

Time dragged interminably. The bank clock struck three. Dawn would begin to streak the east in another hour. If the high-graders were going to strike the wagon yard tonight, it would have to be soon. . . .

Even as the thought struck him, Hamp Adams saw a shadow detach itself from the blackness that was the rear wall of the California Hotel.

Adams stiffened, keyed-up like an overwound spring. He slipped the Colt from leather, hefting it in his hand, as he saw the shadow move erratically through the parked wagons, footfalls making no sound in the thick cushion of dust.

The figure, anonymous under the stars, moved to the outer ring of wagons and then

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seated itself on the grounded tongue of John Scroggin's red-painted, treasure-laden Conestoga.

It remained there, motionless, as if keening the night for suspicious sounds. Blood rioted in Hamp Adams' eardrums. This was the moment Oatie Simmons had been waiting for; perhaps that silhouetted figure seated on the wagon tongue had been the deputy marshal's murderer.

HAMP ADAMS crawled out from under the caboose tarp so as not to let the stiff canvas give off a betraying sound. He straightened slowly, hoping his huge bulk would not show against the dust-veneered background of the borax wagons.

The talcum-fine grit underfoot gave off no betraying sound as Hamp started his stalking approach of the motionless figure seated on Scroggins' wagon tongue. He kept the sixgun behind him, so the blued metal would not give off a glint of starlight.

Ten feet from the seated figure, Hamp froze stock-still as he heard the person draw in a long breath and exhale it slowly. At this distance he saw that his adversary was slightly built, turned sideways to him, staring off across the sage flats as if contemplating the beauty of the night scene.

"All right," Hamp spoke, earing his gunhammer back to full cock. "You're covered. Don't yelp and don't move or I'll plug you."

The figure jumped to its feet, whirling to face him. And then the shocked whisper of Sylvia Curtis reached his ears:

"*Hamp Adams!* What on earth are you snooping around for in the dead of night?"

Anti-climax whipped through Adams' nerves as he jammed his gun in holster and stalked forward. Sylvia, away from the Conestoga's shadow now, was wrapped in a plum-colored dressing gown, her hair done up in a scarf of some kind. The fresh aroma of her reached his nostrils, reminding him of the desert scents when the spring flowers were in bloom.

"I'm asking you the same thing, Sylvia!" he shot back. "It's past three A.M. Ain't safe for you to be galivanting around alone this time of night!"

The girl lifted her arms toward the foaming glitter of the heavens, stretching her supple body as a cat might.

"I couldn't sleep," she said, still whispering. The night seemed made for whispering, somehow. "I just had to get out under the stars. Have you ever breathed such air in your life, Hamp?".

Adams glanced around uneasily. An underlying sense of peril stalking this night still sounded its tocsin somewhere deep in his brain where a man's primitive instincts are stored. Under different circumstances, he couldn't think of anything more pleasureable than to be alone with Sylvia Curtis, under the stars, with the sage-sweet breeze stirring her hair.

"Listen," Hamp said, drawing closer. "I want you to get back in the hotel, Sylvia. I—I'm scouting this wagon yard because I—"

"Because why, Hamp? Is anything wrong?"

"I'm riding a hunch that Oatie Simmons' killer will be prowling hereabouts before daylight, Sylvia. I don't want you out here if it comes to shooting."

The girl reached out to touch his arm.

"Hamp—I can't go back now, knowing you're facing danger all alone. Why would Mr. Simmons' killer—"

"Come on," he said in a rasping undertone. "We got to get under cover, if you're going to insist on palaver."

Sylvia Curtis's shoulder pressed against him as he led her back to the canvas-curtained tank wagon behind the borax hitch. Hunkered in the shadows there, knowing instinctively that he could entrust this girl with any secret, he told her of Oatie Simmons' hunt for high-graders, of John Scroggins' load of rich ore from the Panamints.

"Hamp—I didn't give you credit," the girl said contritely when he finished speaking. "All along, you knew the motive for Mr. Simmons' murder and you didn't tell me—"

"I got to play it close to my vest, Sylvia, not knowing any more than I do. Simmons was a tight-mouthed old varmint. He figgered he'd be showing me the high-grade thief the morning after he booked a

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room in your hotel. Instead he got—"

Hamp broke off, as the night hush was broken by a plaintive *whoo-hoo* of a desert owl, somewhere in the cluster of wagons. The call was instantly answered by a low hooting from the vicinity of the assay office next to the California hotel.

Sylvia, crouched under the wagon tarp beside Adams, felt the man go taut. His lips were close to her ear as he whispered, "That wasn't no screech owl, Sylvia. Signals, Injun fashion."

PEERING through the spokes of the tanker wheel, the man and the girl saw the tall shape move out of the clotted shadows of the hotel alley at the same moment.

Walking unhurriedly, the black figure moved in and out through the wagons, pausing twice to scout the night, then moving on toward the red Conestoga which led off John Scroggins' string.

Hamp Adams heard the girl stifle her heavy breathing as, together, they watched the interloper climb the hickory tongue where minutes ago Sylvia had been drinking in the beauty of the desert night with its stars.

They saw a Stetson-hatted figure climb the wagon tongue, mount to the driver's seat of the Conestoga, unfasten the tarp which covered the load of raw ore.

"Whatever happens," Hamp whispered, "you stay covered, Sylvia. That hombre on the wagon is probably Oatie's killer. He's getting ready to chouse high-grade ore this minute."

The girl's arm stole over Hamp's broad shoulders and his fined-down concentration was rudely shattered by the soft pressure of the girl's lips against his temple.

He wanted to shake off her embracing arm, but he made no move to do so until she removed it herself. It took a real effort to divert his mind back to the activities of the unknown high-grader atop Scroggins' desert wagon.

The man was a black-cut silhouette against the sky, beginning to turn pearl-pink now to the promise of the false dawn. Hamp's sharply-tuned ears caught the abrasive chink of rock specimens being lifted out of the loaded wagon.

The high-grader was holding a gunny sack in one hand, filling it swiftly, silently with the other. His back was to Hamp's station under the borax caboose, an easy target for Hamp's gun.

He started to crawl out from under the tarp, as stealthily as he had done in Sylvia's case. The girl leaned forward, her whisper barely audible above the tom-tomming of his heart:

"Remember that second owlhoot, Hamp. That man is not alone."

Hamp nodded, hand fisting on the walnut stock of his .45. Outside the tarp, he reached in his shirt pocket to draw out his deputy sheriff's star and pinned it on the outside of the pocket. It was no juvenile sense of the melodramatic that made him want the emblem of the law's authority in full view of the man he was about to stalk; it was from an instinctive desire to make this coming arrest entirely official.

Sylvia Curtis held her breath, hands clinging to the wagon spokes behind which she crouched as she saw Hamp Adams come slowly to his full stature. Up on the wagon, the high-grader by now had his gunny sack more than half-filled. He appeared to be hefting each specimen of ore he was removing from the wagon box, as if judging its silver content by its relative weight.

Hamp Adams was halfway to the Conestoga when he lifted his gun and called out in a rasping undertone:

"Hold it, son. Drop the sack and turn around—slow."

The element of surprise was in his favor; the silhouette atop Scroggins' wagon half turned, one knee braced on the driver's seat, the other leg down in the boot.

Hamp saw the high-grader pitch the sack of ore over the edge of the wagon box, heard its stony crunch as it hit the ground, stirring up a puff of alkali dust.

"Hold your fire, Hamp!" the high-grader spoke carefully, turning to face the deputy sheriff below him as he lifted both hands hatbrim high. "You hold the aces on me."

Hamp felt a tremor race down his arm,

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and transmit itself to his gun barrel. That voice, that suave and unruffled voice, could belong to but one man in Ruby City.

"Keep 'em high—both arms, Vaspar!" Hamp called in a louder tone. "I know you pack sleeve guns, from experience. I want you to jump off that wagon, outside the shadow part."

The proprietor of the Golden West Saloon raised his arms higher, seeing the starlight making a ring of Hamp Adams' sixgun muzzle, up-tilted to cover him.

"I'm not bucking you, Hamp," Clede Vaspar said quietly. "I just don't want to be shot to make a hero out of—"

THE gambler's voice was blotted out then by a heavier voice, coming from the direction of the hotel—the voice of Vaspar's right-hand man, Ben Followell. The bartender's sharp-lashed order reached across the night to tell Hamp Adams that he was as good as a dead man, right now:

"Drop that revolver, Adams. You're boxed in!"

Adams jerked his gaze off the frozen figure of Clede Vaspar up on the ore wagon, in time to see Ben Followell's chunky figure emerge from between two Panamint Company wagons not a dozen feet to his left.

Followell had his sawed-off bar gun hugged against his hip, the twin muzzles covering Hamp squarely. At this restricted range, a double charge of buckshot could cut him in two. Followell had been Vaspar's lookout.

The Golden West bartender was stalking forward behind the stumpy-barreled Greener. The sixgun dropped from Hamp's fist and hit the dirt with a soft thud as he wheeled around to face the menace of Vaspar's second.

Adams heard the ominous double click of gunhammers earing back behind Followell's thumb and he knew the bartender intended to kill him. At that precise instant, Sylvia Curtis' soprano voice issued from under the tank wagon at his back:

"Fire that shotgun and you're a dead man, mister! Hamp Adams wasn't fool enough to tackle you two by himself!"

Ben Followell came to a full stop, his Buckshot gun sagging in his grasp. Sylvia's bluff had immobilized the bartender.

From the tail of his eye Adams saw the real danger of this stalemate. Up on the Conestoga, Clede Vaspar was whipping back the tail of his fustian coat to unlimber a belt gun, not trusting to his single-shot derringers in this showdown.

Adams hurled himself to the ground a shaved instant before flame spat from Vaspar's .45. His hand fell across his own gun and he seized it instinctively, lifting it to notch the sights on Clede Vaspar as the crouched gambler swung his fuming Colt down and around for a following shot.

Adams heard Sylvia's sharp-pitched cry as he squeezed trigger, felt the sharp recoil of the .45 against the crotch of his thumb. Murkily behind founting gunsmoke he saw Clede Vaspar's rigid shape buckle, saw the gambler sag forward and then drop headlong over the footboard of the ore wagon.

He had bagged his target, but Followell was at his left and as he rolled over in the dirt he saw that the bartender was going to gamble on Sylvia's bluff.

The twin muzzles of the bartender's gun loomed like cannon barrels as Adams jerked his Colt around and tripped gunhammer, firing without aiming.

His up-angled bullet caught Followell in the chest, but not before the bartender had squeezed his double triggers.

Adams was in the act of coming to his feet when the outer buckshot of the Greener's shot pattern raked his shoulder and side. He was vaguely conscious of Followell falling face forward into the dust, near enough to touch; of the powdersmoke boiling up from the shotgun under his gargantuan bulk. . . .

PAIN lanced through Adams in a dozen spots. He felt the viscid ooze of warm blood soaking his shirt and sleeve. Nausea was in him as he climbed to his feet, weaving unsteadily, aware that his left arm was a dangling, useless weight at his side.

Then Sylvia was scrambling out from under the tankwagon canvas and running to his side.

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"You're shot, Hamp—he shot you—"

Her voice seemed to come from a great distance. He looked down numbly, seeing the ruby droplets trickling off the fingertips of his dangling left hand, soaking into the disturbed dust at his feet.

"If you hadn't hollered—I'd have been blowed to hash-meat, Sylvia," he heard his own voice cawing. "You saved my hide, yelling when you did, Sylvia—"

Her hands were exploring his side, pulling the blood-soaked fabric of his shirt away from his flesh. A light flashed on in an upper window of the California Hotel overlooking this scene, and Hamp saw John Scroggins leaning from a sill, bellowing stridently:

"You O.K., Hamp? You O.K.?"

Masculine pride came to Hamp Adams' assistance then. Disregarding the numbed agony in his arm and shoulder, he grinned up at the Pinkerton man in the window and called back in a shaky voice, "Tabbed your high-graders, John. Vaspar and Followell. They're—cold meat now."

Sylvia was saying, "You've got to let me dress those wounds, Hamp. Come inside with me—hurry—before you bleed to death—"

Hamp holstered his gun and veered away from the girl, lurching over to Scroggins' wagon. The pilfered sack of ore lay beside the front wheel; jack-knifed grotesquely over the wagon tongue was Clede Vaspar, dead with a bullet in the brain, his smoking .45 still clutched in a dangling hand, the muzzle buried sight-deep in the dirt.

He let Sylvia lead him past Ben Followell's sprawled shape in the dust, through the wagons and into the rear door of the hotel kitchen.

Sylvia seated him beside the kitchen table and touched a match to a lamp wick. She was peeling off his buckshot-riddled shirt when John Scroggins came clumping into the kitchen.

The Pinkerton man sized up the puncture wounds in Hamp's side and arm and shoulder and reported succinctly, "You caught the few scattered balls on the outside of that buckshot gun's charge, son. No permanent damage done. If Followell had aimed an inch to the left he'd of blowed your guts all over the landscape."

Sylvia, working coolly and efficiently, brought hot water from the stove, clean tea towels from a drawer. Old John Scroggins hovered around, getting in the way, while the girl went to work cleansing Adams' wounds.

"We'll get the doctor over from Victorville to probe that shot out of you tomorrow, Hamp," Sylvia said briskly. "As Mr. Scroggins said, it isn't serious."

Adams grinned feebly. "Feel like I been stung by a hive full of hornets . . . John, I figger my deputy-sheriffin' is done. How about you taking charge of Vaspar and Followell?"

Scroggins grinned under his handle bar mustache and started toward the door.

"My wagon is pulling out in an hour for San Berdoo," he said. "I'll haul them carcasses out of town for you. You stand to rake in a panamint Company reward for this night's target practise, son."

As Scroggins was heading out the door, Adams called, "You'll find a sack of high-grade laying beside the wheel of your wagon, John. Vaspar was loading it when the showdown broke."

ALONE together in the kitchen, Hamp was caught by surprise when Sylvia suddenly dissolved in tears. Putting his free hand under her chin, he tipped the girl's head up to his and, bending forward, crushed his lips demandingly to hers. Like flint igniting tinder, Sylva responded, pulling his head close.

"You might have been killed," Sylvia whispered over and over. "Killed before I had a chance to let you know that I love every lazy bone in your body—"

Hamp chuckled to cover his ecstatic confusion. "Folks'll say I had to marry you to keep from going bankrupt. I—I reckon the same goes for me, too, Sylvia. I love you—"

Through brimming tears, Sylvia said with infinite tenderness, "It's as if you and I had a rendezvous at this time and this place out of all eternity, darling." Then her practical nature took over, for she

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drew back and said poignantly, "Can you be sure you love me, Hamp? Knowing me for such a little while? I've known you were my man from the moment I first saw you at the station. But for me, the first time has got to be for keeps—"

Hamp said hoarsely, "If I'd known you all my life I couldn't love you any deeper, I reckon. Even though you're as independent as a jennie mule and a mite unethical in your business dealing when a man's back is turned."

Sylvia tossed her head and went back to her bandaging.

"Hamp," she said crisply, "we may as well settle something here and now. You are a lazy, good-for-nothing rascal. Ambition is something you haven't even heard of. Together, we could put Ruby City on the map. But being married to me will change you, Hamp, or break you. You'll have to hustle and like it."

Hamp said in an aggrieved voice, "There's something you ain't had time to think of yet. Only tonight John Scroggins told me the mines are petering out up north. And the Death Valley borax business is declining, what with them new deposits over at Karmer. Five years from now, maybe sooner, wagons won't be running through Ruby. There won't even be a Ruby."

Sylvia ripped another bandage, refusing to take his dire predictions seriously.

"Hamp," she said, "Mrs. Mateo told me that when you first came to the desert you were dying—"

"I was a lunger with six months to go, yes. Look at me now."

"That's exactly it. Thousands of people need the desert to regain their health. We can build Ruby City into a health resort for the wealthy trade from Los Angeles and San Francisco, Hamp. With your brick building, and my get-up-and-go, we've got a great future right here in the Mojave—does that sound cold-blooded?"

The screen door slammed open and John Scroggins came stalking in, a worried look on his bony face.

"That sack of high-grade stuff Vaspar was swiping," the Pinkerton man said. "Whar-at did you say he dropped it?"

Adams looked around, scowling. "Beside the nigh front wheel."

Scroggins shook his head. "Well, it's gone. Vaspar and Followell had a third pardner working with 'em tonight, son. He snuck in and made off with the evidence while we were in here palavering. Without that loot, we got no case."

Sylvia and Hamp exchanged glances. The girl said in a shocked whisper, "That owl's hoot—the first one—it came further off—"

Hamp tongued his cheek thoughtfully, his eyes serious.

"This case ain't finished," Scroggins was saying, "until we locate that third man—and the evidence that there was theft involved."

To Scroggins' surprise, Hamp Adams grinned mysteriously.

"I think I got your other high-grader tabbed," he said. "The kingpin of the outfit. I'll nab him tomorrow morning and close out this case for you, John."

Sylvia said impatiently, "There you go, Hamp, putting off until tomorrow what you should do tonight. If it wasn't for your sore arm, I'd—"

Hamp shook his head. "This thing has got to work itself out its own way," he said. "Tomorrow morning, I'll nab your high-grader with the loot. And then, young lady, we're taking a pasear over to San Berdoo and looking up a preacher. You're too good a cook for me to give you time to change your mind."

ON the following morning at ten o'clock, Hamp Adams drove General Lee and General Grant over the ridge to the Santa Fe railroad depot. His left arm was in a sling, and his fresh shirt covered the bandages which were taped in divers spots along his ribs. Otherwise, he showed little evidence of last night's shoot-out.

From the crest of the ridge he could see the dust of the outbound ore wagon trains moving at their snail's pace toward the yawning maw of the canyon. On John Scroggins' lead wagon, two tarp-bound

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corpses were being carried as extra baggage. Vaspar and Followell would not be opening their saloon for business tonight; Adams intended to see to it that the Golden West would remain padlocked forever.

Eastward, the weekly local freight which made the Yermo-San Berdoo run was approaching Ruby City. On hand to meet it at Ruby's privy-sized depot was the Santa Fe stationmaster, Todd Hix. And as Hamp Adams drove his buckboard alongside the loading platform, he was startled to see that Hix was accompanied by Sylvia Curtis.

"What are you doing here, Sylvia?" Hamp demanded testily.

The girl shrugged, paying no attention whatever to his crippled arm.

"I'm running a restaurant," she reminded him, "and I've got to place an order with the freight conductor to bring me back foodstuffs from San Berdoo. I've already cleaned out the Ruby City Mercantile, unless I resort to serving canned stuff, which I refuse to do."

Hamp grinned and stepped out on the platform. For the first time in Todd Hix's memory, the genial owner of the Freighter's Rest hotel was wearing his law badge and a holstered .45 at his hip.

"You're looking mighty pert for a man who's just been run out of the hotel business," Hix groused, his disposition at its customary morning sourness.

Adams eyed the incoming freight, now less than a mile away, and said conversationally, "How come you're meeting a train, Todd? Company rules tightening up on you?"

Todd Hix waved at the assorted boxes and beer kegs he had waiting on the station platform.

"Shipping out Vaspar's empties and assorted freight that's been piling up," grumbled the agent. "I wonder who'll be taking over the Golden West, now that Vaspar and Ben are gone?"

Hamp Adams made a circle of Hix's miscellaneous freight. He finally settled his attention on a crate labeled "Blasting Powder," which was consigned to a Miners' Outfitting firm in San Bernardino. Strangely, it bore no return address.

Shoving the powder box with his foot, Hamp said casually, "Who'd be shipping explosive out of Ruby, this long after it ceased to be a mining camp, Hix?"

Hix said waspishly, "I am. Some leftover stock from the Golden Poppy. Still good. I'm peddling it in Berdoo."

Hamp's glance flickered over to Sylvia, who was watching him intently. Then, in his usual indolent slouch, he walked over to the station wall and took down a fire ax from its clamp.

While Hix watched curiously, Hamp walked over to the powder box and calmly began prying open the lid.

"Watch what you're doing, Hamp!" Hix cried in alarm. "You could blow us to smithereens! That stuff's touchy!"

Hamp got the box lid loosened, then tossed the fire ax to one side and hunkered down to feel inside the crate. What appeared to be loose, crushed stone met his fingers instead of wax-wrapped dynamite packed in sawdust.

There was a wild gleam in Todd Hix's rheumy eyes when he saw Hamp look up from his kneeling position.

"You knew you had to get that high-grade out of town pronto, Hix," Hamp said quietly, "so you were going to ship it this morning. I was wondering, last night, how Vaspar—a common tinhorn cardsharp—would know what wagon to lift high-grade out of."

Hix's face was pale as banana meat now. His fists opened and clenched at his sides, his body stooped over in the deformed crouch which his old mining-shaft injury had cramped in his spine.

"You're under arrest, Hix," Hamp Adams went on, still in the quietest of voices. "Not only for being the brains behind this three-man high-grading team, but for the murder of Oatie Simmons as well."

SYLVIA emitted a little frightened cry as she saw Todd Hix's left hand streak to the scarred holster at his hip and claw a Peacemaker .44 half out of leather. His draw was hampered by his spinal deformity and that was why Hamp Adams chose to club him across the head with

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his own gun; rather than letting a shoot-out run its course.

Staring down at the quivering shape of the Santa Fe agent, Hamp said, "Everything pointed to Hix's guilt, but I was too blind to see it. Oatie told me the high-grader was somebody pretty close to me. But you helped pin him down, Sylvia."

"I did?"

"You told me about Primotivo swiping his mother's butcher knife. I gave Tivo a dollar's worth of likrish sticks this morning to bribe a confession out of him. He sold the knife to Todd Hix for four bits."

Sylvia could only stare.

"Hix left the knife in Oatie's back on purpose, so's I would suspect any one of a dozen Mexicans in town who own knives like it."

Sylvia said after a pause, "But how did Hix know Mr. Simmons was a law officer?"

Hamp shrugged. "He bunks in the room over the kitchen where Oatie told me who he was and what he was after. Easy enough for Hix to eavesdrop on us. And he used to be a miner—that's why he took to high-grading. With Vaspar and Followell helping him, doing the actual stealing. Being the Santa Fe agent, it was easy for Hix to box the ore and ship it to this outfit in San Berdoo. I'll have the sheriff call on his buyer directly and jail him for trafficking in stolen ore."

The Yermo local was chuffing into the station now, the engineer staring goggle-eyed from his cab as he saw the Ruby City agent sprawled unconscious at Hamp's feet.

Sylvia said hopefully, "This train can take us to Victorville, can't it, darling? There must be a preacher in Victorville—"

A week later, Sheriff Blaine Pursley of San Bernardino County rode into Ruby City on horseback, making one of his annual junkets into the Mojave Desert country. This time the chore was a pleasant one—commending a deputy for a job well done.

Riding in, Pursley was surprised to see two changes in this ghost town. One was the new pine boards which covered the doors and windows of the once-notorious Golden West Saloon.

The other was a newly-painted sign, replacing one which for a decade had graced the facade of the two-story brick structure known as the Freighter's Rest Hotel. The sign now read:

New California Hotel & Cafe
Tastiest Food in Town
Mr. & Mrs. Hampshire Adams, Props.

The salty old lawman from San Berdoo shook his head in wonder as he dismounted in front of the building.

"Never can tell what a woman's influence can do to change a man overnight," he drawled to himself. "Don't seem possible Hamp Adams is the same good-for-nothing who wanted to resign his deputy's star a week ago. I'd offer him a desk job in town if I thought I could pry him loose from the desert."

Seeing Hamp and Sylvia coming out to meet him, Pursley knew he would never make them the proposition.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

A Movie News Roundup by ROBERT CUMMINGS Next Issue

Featuring a review of Universal-International's

THE LAWLESS BREED

starring ROCK HUDSON and MARY CASTLE

PLUS *a word-and-picture personality sketch of*

DENNIS MORGAN

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RAT SHOOT

THE TOWN WAS A HOT SPOT where three states and their outlaws met—and the sheriff had to keep cool. . . .

by

Robert Moore Williams

BEFORE he reached the town of Kilmer, Sam Lamar heard the pistol shots begin. At the first sharp, spiteful sound coming through the thin air, Lamar reined in his horse. Behind him, the led horse came to a halt. The deputy listened. It was not that he enjoyed listening to the sound of pistols—he had heard far too many pistol shots to have any liking for them left in him. It was simply that a wise man who wished to remain alive always paid heed when guns began to talk, especially if he was a deputy sheriff riding into the red-hot little-town of Kilmer.

"Shooting match," Lamar decided, listening. Shooting matches were not unusual in Kilmer. According to the reports the deputy had heard, the residents of this town spent most of their time practicing shooting, for reasons which they considered adequate. At the thought, a frown crossed Lamar's face.

He had a momentary impulse to turn back. He checked it instantly. His friends, and wanted men who had failed to ride far enough or fast enough, called him bull-headed Sam Lamar. As he clucked to his horse and rode forward, the set lines of his face revealed that at this moment he was very much bull-headed Sam Lamar.

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A less bull-headed deputy would have taken a posse with him into Kilmer. Some deputies had done exactly that. The result had been a lot of shooting across state lines but no outlaws brought to justice. A posse was always so big that it advertised its coming long before it reached Kilmer. By the time the posse reached the red-hot little town, the outlaws were always well set to receive it with bushwhacking pistol shots.

Listening to the shooting, Lamar mused darkly that it might not be easy to take a wanted man out of a town where most of the inhabitants spent so much of their time practicing shooting. It might not even be possible. But Riker had killed two men in cold blood, and one of those men had been a close personal friend of Sam Lamar.

Folks who really knew Sam Lamar had figured that Riker had made a serious mistake in that. Riker, in spite of his reputation for being fearless, must have figured the same thing. He had headed for Kilmer, and the peculiar state of affairs which existed there, a state of affairs which made the wild, tough little town a haven for outlaws. Reports coming over the grapevine said that Riker was still there. That had been enough for Sam Lamar.

"I'm going after him!" Lamar had said.

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The sheriff had tried to reason with him. There was not much point in trying to reason with Sam Lamar when his mind was made up. He rode his own lonesome trail. And tried to like it.

Lamar glanced down at the tarnished star on his leather jacket. For an instant, he was minded to take it off, then decided against it. Why should he take off the star? Somebody would be certain to recognize his face.

Kilmer was a huddle of wooden buildings set on a flat plain. Roads came to it from the east, from the west and from the north. The main street of the town was set directly on the boundary line between three states. To the north was Colorado, to the east was Oklahoma, and to the west was New Mexico. The fact that three states met here was one reason Kilmer was so popular. If the sheriff from one state came looking for an outlaw, the wanted man could saunter across the street and be fairly safe. True, there was such a thing as extradition, but it was a long, slow process. Outlaws could always move faster than the law. If they moved slower, they soon found trail's end in a loop of rope or a penitentiary.

In Kilmer outlaws and posses often exchanged shots across the main street, the net gain being to further outrage the honest citizens who tried to earn a living in this hot little border town.

Until somebody like Sam Lamar came along, an outlaw was fairly safe in Kilmer. People like Sam Lamar were one reason why the outlaws in this town spent time in pistol practice.

AS HE rode into town, Lamar noticed the woman. She was washing clothes in the shade of a house. Her head was done up in a white cloth; her sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, and she was scrubbing furiously. She was about twenty, Lamar judged, and more than attractive. It would be very nice to have a woman such as this to wash your clothes for you, and darn your socks, and fix your meals and be in love with, he thought wistfully. Carefully he closed his mind against such thinking. No deputy sheriff riding into the town of Kilmer had any right to be thinking such thoughts, or to be noticing a woman, no matter how attractive she was. He rode on past. She looked up at him, looked again, then, skirts flying, suds dripping from her hands, she was running toward him.

"Sam! Sam Lamar!"

The startled deputy reined in his horse. He was certain he didn't know any woman in this town. But this one appeared to know him. Who could she be? Brown hair peeped from under the towel tied around her head, and brown eyes sparkled up at him. White teeth showed in a delighted smile that said that seeing him made her the happiest woman on earth. "Sam, don't you remember me?" she said, reproachfully.

Then he remembered her. Five years before, when he had been twenty, a fifteen year old girl had had a crush on him—a flat-chested, narrow-hipped girl who was mostly bossy tomboy. He had been riding for the Hat brand at the time and the boys had kidded him mercilessly about the 15-year old tomboy who was making eyes at him. But even now he couldn't remember her name, even if he could remember who she was.

Politely he slid from his horse. Awkwardly, he took off his hat. He faced mock reproach but under the reproach was deep pleasure at the mere sight of him. Somehow it pleased him to be remembered, even if he didn't know who was remembering him. "Sam Lamar! You still don't remember me! I'm Jean Kane."

"Thunderation!" Lamar said. He blinked startled eyes at her. Something had certainly happened to Jeanie Kane. She wasn't a tomboy any longer. She wasn't flat-chested, nor was she narrow-hipped—not by a jug full!

He wondered if the dress accounted for the difference in the appearance of her hips, hastily decided that it did not, then even more hastily decided that it wasn't exactly polite for him to even think any more about such matters.

"Miss Jean!" He found himself shaking hands with her. Her handclasp was firm and friendly if slightly soapsudsy, which somehow made it more pleasant. "My! How

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you've growed up!" In spite of his efforts, he wasn't able to keep his mind away from the changes that had so obviously taken place in this young woman.

As if she was reading his mind, teasing imps danced in her eyes. "I wondered if you'd notice," she murmured.

Sam Lamar blushed. "What—what are you doing here?" he asked hastily.

"Daddy came here two years ago. He opened a hardware store."

"Um. Doing any good?"

Her face clouded. "He's selling lots of shells," she said. "What—" For the first time, she became aware of the star on his chest. At the sight of it her eyes widened in alarm, then narrowed in quick fear. "Sam—"

"I'm a deputy now," he said. Pride was in his voice. To him, being a deputy was a prideful thing.

"And you're coming here as a deputy?" She sounded shocked but not surprised. The tone of her voice indicated that this was exactly what she expected bull-headed Sam Lamar to do.

"Why, yes," he answered.

SUDDENLY her voice changed. Quick urgency appeared in it. "Sam, you take that star off this instant. Dou you hear me? Take it off this instant." She had taken hold of his leather jacket and was digging with expert fingers at the catch which held the badge in place. He took her hands. Gently but firmly he forced them away.

"Sam Lamar!" she blazed at him. "Do you know what it means to wear a star in this town?"

"I reckon it don't mean as much as you think it does, Miss Jeanie," he answered. "Why shouldn't I wear it? I got a right to wear it."

"You've got a right to stay alive too!" Open anger was in her voice now. Then the anger was suddenly quenched. "Please, Sam. I know you're bull-headed and I know you're a deputy and have a right to wear your star. But you don't seem to understand about this." She was talking urgently now, pleading desperately with him. Very gravely, he listened to her tell him why he should leave Kilmer, or take off his badge.

"Thanks, Miss Jeanie," he said, when she had finished.

She stared at him. "Don't you believe what I just told you?"

"I believe you. But I've still got a job to do here."

She didn't ask him about the job. She must have guessed its nature. "You crazy fool!" For an instant she stared up at him, urgent pleading on her face. Turning, she darted from him toward the house.

As she ran, he saw that her shoulders were shaking. He got on his horse. Girls were certainly curious critters, he thought angrily. Didn't she understand that a man had a job to do?

Ahead of him, the pistol shots were louder. He came to the shooters, drew his horse to a halt, sat watching. The shooters were on a vacant lot. They had a big box on the ground. They were getting ready to shoot again, but there was no target. Then Lamar saw what they were doing. The big box was a rat trap. Every so often a live rat was released from it. The marksman whose turn it was to shoot got a chance to kill the rat before it could escape into the high weeds on the other side of the lot.

"It's Riker's turn!" Somebody yelled. On his horse, Lamar froze. They were so engrossed in their game that they did not notice the lean, brown-faced man sitting his mount in the street. The well-trained animal did not shy at target shooting beyond flicking his ears.

This was the first time Sam Lamar had ever seen Riker. The man was tall and lean. He was wearing a black suit and a black hat. No gun was visible. The rat was released from the box. It scuttled across the open ground. Lamar hardly saw the gun drawn, but he knew it came from a holster inside the black coat.

The pistol crashed—once.

The scurrying rat was mangled meat driven across the hard ground by the force of the bullet.

"That's the third time Riker has got one with his first shot!" someone said, awed.

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Again the outlaw's gun cracked. "For good measure," he said flatly.

Riker blew smoke from his weapon, replaced the used shell, slid the gun out of sight. Another rat was released. "Fat's turn," somebody yelled.

Fat was short and squat. He emptied his gun. The rat escaped into the tall weeds.

"Them's the skippinest rats I ever did see," Fat complained. "I ain't got one yet."

"Better practice up some more," Riker advised him. "You may need your shooting eye some day."

"And don't I know it?" Fat answered. "Turn loose another one of them rats. By golly, I mean to get me one."

Another rat was released. Again Fat emptied his pistol. Dirt flew into the air. As the frightened rat was about to scuttle into the weeds, Riker drew his gun, fired a single shot. The rat did not make the weeds.

"Dang it, Riker, that's the best shooting I ever saw in my whole life," said Fat admiringly.

SITTING his horse, Sam Lamar was suddenly aware of sweat on him. It was on his forehead, on his upper lip and under his arms. It was running down his body in cold ripples. He pulled the head of his horse away, heading for the nearest saloon. He tied both horses at the gnawed hitching rail in front, stepped across the gully at the edge of the boardwalk, and went through the swinging doors. Except for the bartender, the place was empty. He went up to the bar. The bartender stared at him.

"Whisky," he said.

The bartender set a shot glass and a bottle in front of him in cold silence. He gulped down the raw liquid. Some of the sweat went away from his face, but not all of it.

Coldly and unsympathetically, the bartender looked him over. He seemed to divine what had happened. "Did you have a shock, Deputy?" he asked.

"Huh?" Sam Lamar suddenly realized that he wished he had not been so obstinate about wearing his star. At this realization, the sweat threatened to erupt on him again. He poured himself another shot, held it in front of his eyes. His hand was steady enough, there was no tremble in it. In the mirror behind the bar, his face was clear, though a little pale. Apparently the sweat was the only sign of the shock he had received when Riker had hit a running rat twice in a row. And the cold way he plugged that lifeless mangle remained to haunt him too. This marksman was the man he had come to Kilmer to get!

The sweat thickened.

"Did you have a shock, Deputy?" the bartender repeated.

"Well—"

"Deputies in Kilmer often get a shock," the bartender continued. "It don't last long, though. After we bury 'em, the shock is all over." Polishing with a wet rag, he moved along the bar.

Sam Lamar felt his throat muscles tighten. Did this damned fool think he could tease him? But the bartender wasn't kidding, not quite, and Lamar knew it. Behind the words there was a vein of dead-serious truth.

"I reckon maybe I can stand a shock or two. I reckon maybe I can give out a shock or two myself. I reckon I may not go six feet under all by my lonesome, neither." His voice was brittle and taut, but he meant every word he said.

The bartender continued polishing. He did not look up. "I'll pass the word along about how you can give out shocks," he said. He moved to the back door, spoke briefly to someone outside, then returned to his task of polishing the bar. Sam Lamar watched him from rock-hard eyes.

He did not know what would happen next. Until it happened. . . .

THE news got around very fast. A deputy sheriff was in Kilmer. He was in the Eldorado Saloon. Nobody knew what state he was from or who he was looking for. At the news, the outlaws wanted in New Mexico moved over to the Oklahoma section of town. Those wanted in Oklahoma moved over to New Mexico. Those wanted in both New Mexico and

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Oklahoma took a quiet walk to Colorado. Then they awaited developments. These were not long in coming. Fat expressed the idea that seemed to appear simultaneously among them. "Hell, there's only *one* deputy."

Only one deputy was not much of a problem. Still, his presence was a source of irritation. Besides, he was in their favorite saloon. Something had to be done. They conferred together. Fat had an idea. "This is the way we'll handle this deputy," he said. Satisfaction sounded in his voice as he spoke. As he outlined his plan, satisfaction appeared on the faces of the outlaws listening to him.

Sam Lamar stood at the bar. He drank no more whisky, switching instead to red soda. While he drank, he tried to decide what he was going to do. That rat shooting exhibition had startled him more than he cared to admit. If he hadn't seen it with

"Did I tell you my husband and I spent two months on a dude ranch?"

his own eyes, he would never have believed that such shooting was possible. And he couldn't help knowing that Riker was a man who enjoyed killing. Vaguely, he wished that he hadn't seen it. There was such a thing as knowing too much.

Standing at the bar, he could look under the swinging door and see the feet of his mount and the led horse tied at the hitching rail. "Maybe I was a mite too ambitious in bringing that led horse," he thought. He had brought the led horse for Riker to ride. Vigorously he clamped his jaws together to shut off all such thinking.

Men were coming into the saloon. Although there was no similarity in dress, in manners, or in speech, there was a sameness about them which showed in the wary expressions in their eyes and the bleakness of their faces. They did not smile. None of them, by facial expression or in any other manner, indicated that they saw the deputy sheriff standing at the bar, yet Lamar would have been willing to bet that not one of them had failed to spot him instantly. Men on the dodge did not miss a star.

Men came and went. Three started a mild poker game at the rear. Lamar started on another bottle of red soda. Then the swinging doors opened and a tall man in a black suit entered. Sam Lamar felt his fingers tighten around the bottle of soda. This was Riker, the rat killer.

The bartender hastily set whisky before the tall man, a special bottle which he took from behind the bar. Riker picked up the bottle to pour the liquid into the shot glass. Lamar moved very fast along the bar.

"Set the bottle down and turn your hands toward me," said Lamar.

A startled expression appeared on Riker's face as he turned. One glance took in the star, the gun that was covering him and the face of the deputy over the gun. Slowly Riker pivoted toward Lamar, his hands held out in front of him.

Using one hand, Lamar snapped the handcuffs in place.

The saloon was utterly still. Back of the mahogany, the bartender was staring from bulging eyes at what was happening.

"I don't understand this," Riker said.

"You're under arrest."

"What state issued your warrant, Deputy?"

"The state you're in now," Lamar answered. He jammed his gun against Riker's middle, slid his hand under the black coat. The gun was a .38, a deadly weapon in the hands of a man who could shoot accurately enough to put a bullet into the body of a jumping rat.

"But what state—" Riker started to ask again.

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"The state where I'm taking you, you're wanted plenty," Lamar answered. "Walk out the front door."

Leaving a soundless saloon behind them, they went through the swinging doors.

"You'll ride the bay," Lamar said.

Riker offered no resistance. He stooped to duck under the hitching rail, then moved forward very quickly.

The bullet coming from nowhere missed Sam Lamar by at least a yard, but it showed him the kind of trap he had walked into. He threw himself under the hitching rail and into the gully.

MOMENTS later the silence of Kilmer was shattered by the blast of guns. Lead poured into the wooden walk. It whanged from the posts holding up the hitching rail and it screamed inches above the deputy's head. Around him horses began to buck. They broke their hitches in frantic efforts to get away from this hail of lead.

As the first shot sounded, Riker ducked between the two horses. Bending low, he scooted around the corner of the saloon and out of sight.

Sam Lamar did not see what had happened to Riker; he only knew his man was gone.

He knew also what had happened.

They had set a trap for him. One by one the wanted men had walked into the saloon, expecting him to arrest one of them. They had intended to let him get the man he wanted. As he walked out of the saloon, he was to have walked into a burst of hot lead.

The only thing that had saved him was the fact that the person who had fired first had been too eager and had missed. "More practice shooting rats for him!" Lamar thought grimly.

Sixguns were shooting at him. He could not tell from what direction the slugs were coming, but there was no doubt in his mind that they were coming. Suddenly a shotgun began to boom. Then another shotgun started to talk. He tried to dig deeper into the gully, flinching from the buckshot that would be whistling over his head.

But no buckshot came. The other guns went into startled silence. Sam Lamar dared to lift his head. No one was in sight. He caught a glimpse of movement on top of a nearby building.

If they got above him, he would be no better off than a trapped rat.

Sam Lamar came to his feet. He dived under the hitching rail and threw himself at the swinging doors of the saloon. At any instant, he experted hot lead to blast into him. No lead came; not a shot was fired. Vaguely he heard a voice scream. Then he burst through the swinging doors of the saloon and threw himself on the floor, his gun up and ready.

The poker game had ended, and the loungers had gone from the bar. The back door stood open.

The bartender was not in sight.

"Come out from behind that bar," Lamar said.

There was no answer. Lamar put a bullet into the bar. The bartender came hastily out of hiding, his hands in the air.

"I see you passed the word along all right," Lamar said.

"Well—I—uh—"

"There's about to be one less bartender in this town," Lamar said.

The bartender's face turned a shade of yellow and his elevated hands began to tremble.

"Get me some light rope or strong cord," Lamar said. "And no foolishness while you're doing it."

Lamar left the bartender bound and gagged, lying face down behind his own bar. . . .

OUTSIDE there was silence. It was uncanny, but Lamar did not try to understand it. He thought grimly that probably the outlaws were deciding how they would take their next shots at their jumping rat. He went to the back door, found an empty alley there. It held weeds and tin cans but no human life. The gunfire had been a signal for all honest residents of Kilmer to take cover. They were still under cover, waiting to see what was going to happen. Only the outlaws

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were likely to be moving around now. And one rat, human size and human type. Lamar was that rat. He felt just exactly like the rats he had seen scurrying for the weeds.

He stepped into the alley. A blacksmith shop was on his left. It opened on the side street, but there was an open back door. The sound of a voice came from inside.

"Okay, Riker, the cuffs are off."

"Good. Lend me your gun."

Gun in hand, Riker came through the back door of the blacksmith shop.

The deputy and the outlaw stood facing each other. An expression of surprise showed on Riker's face. The last sight he had expected to see at this moment was this deputy sheriff. He jerked up his gun.

Flame spouted from it.

There was no question but that the man was fast. Sam Lamar saw the flashing movement of the lifted gun; he heard the bullet pop past his head. He stepped casually to the side, and the bullet missed. The gun in Lamar's hand shouted thunder and flame. He was glad he had watched Riker's shooting practice. It had taught him which way and how fast to move.

Dust popped out of the shoulder of Riker's black coat. The outlaw dropped his gun, snatched at his shoulder. Pain and surprise were on his face.

"It's one thing to shoot a running rat," Sam Lamar said. "It's something else to shoot a man with a gun in his hand."

Riker made choking noises in his throat.

"Target practice on running rats don't do you much good, *the rats can't shoot back,*" Lamar said. "Get your hands behind your back. I'm going to put another pair of cuffs on you. If you resist, I'm going to blow a hole in your head. If your shoulder hurts, think how the rats must have felt when you put slugs into them."

Wincing, Riker obeyed. Lamar snapped the cuffs into place. He walked the man into the blacksmith shop. There he made the startled blacksmith cut a chunk out of the coat and put a bandage over the hole in the shoulder.

"Don't worry, Riker, we're not going to let you bleed to death," Lamar said grimly. "Your kind we save to hang."

Outside in the town of Kilmer there was still silence.

Well, what of it? Lamar thought. I've got to get a couple of new horses. . . "Move ahead of me, you!"

Riker walked before him, with the deputy's gun muzzle jammed into his back. "So your friends will know you'll get it right along with me if they should try any smart tricks."

Lamar walked the outlaw down the middle of the street. Somewhere he would find horses.

"Hold up there," a startled voice said from up above him. "Hold up, you."

FROM the top of the nearest building, Sam Lamar saw the twin barrels of a shotgun looking down at him. They were poking over the edge of the roof. Riker saw them too. He dropped flat on the ground, screaming, "Let him have it!"

Lamar, standing in the street, was directly in line with the shotgun. A rain of buckshot at that angle would cut him down. Riker had dropped to the ground, leaving the deputy a perfect target. He could shoot the outlaw, but that one shot would spell his own doom.

The barrels of the shotgun lifted away from the edge of the roof, and a startled face looked down at him. Then there were two faces and a voice was saying, "Dad, that's Sam Lamar. That's the deputy—don't shoot him!"

"How'd I know?" a voice grumbled up above.

The face of Jean Kane was looking down at him. She had a rifle in her hands. "Sam, are you all right?"

"I'm all right but I'm sure as heck surprised. Did you, by any chance, happen to fire that first shot at me, when I came out of the saloon, to warn me?"

"I sure did," the girl answered. "We saw them setting the trap for you and decided to take a hand in it."

"I got tired of just selling shells to outlaws," Silas Kane said from the roof. "I decided it was about time that some of the honest citizens of this town started using a few shells themselves."

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Looking upward, Sam Lamar gasped.

"If that surprises you, take a look down this side street," Silas continued.

Lamar moved. Standing against the wall, their hands high in the air, menaced and completely covered by the shotguns on the roof above, were nine men—the outlaws of Kilmer. Fat, shivering as if he were losing pounds of lard with each passing minute, was among them. On the street were two inert bodies, mute evidence of the fact that the honest citizens of Kilmer could use shells as well as sell them.

"Tie 'em up and take 'em along with you," Silas Kane called down from the roof of his hardware store. "We've seen enough of them around here!"

Down in the street, Lamar grinned.

"All we ever needed in Kilmer was one lawman with enough guts to come into town with his star on his chest instead of in his pocket," Jean's father continued.

Sam Lamar felt his grin grow wider. Now this little hell-town might be a place where a decent citizen could live in peace.

"Where are you going?" he heard Silas Kane ask.

"Down to see about Sam," his daughter answered.

Sam Lamar heard her feet come running through the store toward him. She was coming to see about him! There was food for wonder in the thought. And the sight of her bursting through the front door was food for even more wonder.

One look at her and he found those previously excluded thoughts flooding back to mind. Jean wasn't a tomboy any longer; she was a fully grown young woman. She was all that went with every meaning of the word. And she was his!

Sam Lamar's grin grew broadest when he took her in his arms, and then it was lost altogether.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Old Fort Connah, a Hudson Bay Company Trading Post, a relic of the pioneer West dating back to 1847, is located near Ninepipe and Kicking Horse Reservoirs about 20 miles south of Flathead Lake—in what state?

2. How many snaps per leg on the average snap-around, batwing cowboy chaps, modern style?

3. What river circles around the base of the Chisos Mountains to form what is called the Big Bend in Texas?

4. Do buffalo cows, as well as bulls, have horns?

5. You are on Market Street, looking toward the Embarcadero, beyond the end of which lie Yerba Buena Island and Treasure Island, with Alcatraz Island some distance off to their left. What city?

6. What is a bronc-rider belt?

7. If an old-time range boss told his cowhands to "cut the herd for Nellies," what did he mean?

8. In what state are the following Indian Reservations: Kiowa, Cheyenne and Arapaho, Wichita, Tonkawa, Ponca, Osage, Cherokee, Quapaw, Choctaw, Kickapoo, Sac and Fox, Creek, Chickasaw, Seminole, Shawnee, and maybe others I don't know about?

9. Is the nose band an essential part of all bridles?

10. For what purpose is a rope with a swivel in it sometimes useful in handling ranch livestock?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 62. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

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Adios, Mr. Ridenour

By Ben T. Young

THE FATHER OF THE BRIDE kept this prospective groom hopping

WHEN Grove Terrell rode into the Cinch-Buckle yard there were lights in the bunkhouse and cook shack; but, save for the intermittent glow of a cigar on the front porch, the big log ranch house was dark as the inside of a black boot. Leaving his pony at the hitch-rail, Grove moved toward the steps. Unrest was churning through him like wind through a pasture of belt-high grama. "Howdy," he said, dragging off his hat.

"Howdy," Sam Ridenour growled, sociable as a bear with a sore paw. "Who're you?"

Grove told him. "Where's Kate?"

Sam didn't answer that one. Instead, he put another question. "You the jasper that was gandering round here a year er so ago?"

Grove hadn't expected much of a welcome from this crusty old blister, but he had supposed that he would be remembered

Grove fetched him another swipe, and the stove went over

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as the jigger who was going to marry the old blister's daughter. "That's right," he said. "I was gentling broncs on contract for the Broken Bow that summer."

"Where you been, meantime?"

"Down in Cuba, with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. Got some Spanish shrapnel slugs in my back; and them the regimental sawbones missed they been digging out down at the hospital at Fort Russel in Cheyenne. I've just been discharged."

"S'pose you're looking for work?"

"No, sir." Grove was getting plumb exasperated; and though he hadn't been invited to, he stepped onto the porch and sat on the edge of a cowhide chair. "Look, Mr. Ridenour, seems like you don't remember, but Kate's going to marry me."

"She say so?"

"Sure as sunup, she did. And you agreed to it."

Sam tossed his cigar-butt over the rail into Kate's carefully-tended petunia bed. "All right, if I said so. But maybe Kate's changed her mind."

"I don't think so, judging from the letters I been getting. Where is she?"

"Gone to a dance with Bercaw. I been figuring maybe she'n him was going to marry. She could do worse."

"Damned if I see how!" Grove flared. "Of all the rancid left-handed—"

"Better keep them opinions to yourself or he'll deal you out a lot of misery."

"How can he?"

"If Kate throws in with you, you'll be working for him, won't you? He's the foreman."

"I won't be working for him or anybody else!" Grove had really toughed up now. "You seem to have a memory like a sieve, but I told you about that little old place I'm homesteading up on the Belle Fourche. I filed on it and spent some time there before taking that Broken Bow contract to earn more dinero for grub and bob-wire and such like. When the War came I got leave from the land office to enlist; and the time I spent in the Army applies on my residence requirements, so I've got just a year left before getting title. Then it'll all be mine."

HAULING in another long breath, Grove let fly again. "First off I built a topnotch three-room log house and a barn and corrals, and when I hauled out for the War I left an old smooth-bore named Alex Corbett on the place to mind things. I remember telling you that Kate and I planned to live there when we were married."

"Likely I didn't pay no 'tention. Anybody hitched to Kate stays right here and learns the ropes; 'cause when I sack my saddle, Kate becomes the big casino and I want she should have a pardner who can help her. Now nobody but a dam' jughead would turn down such a future."

"Well, I'm turning it down, you bet. First, I don't like working cattle. Second, I don't like working for anybody. I've already got a grade stallion and some brood mares up on my own place, and I aim to run horses there even if it never is no more'n a shirt-tail outfit."

"You expect Kate to leave all this for a nester's shack?"

"She will if she marries me."

"Aw, stop churning the air like a windmill." Getting stiffly to his sock-covered feet, Sam picked up his boots. "Move your traps into the bunkhouse and go to work in the morning."

Having risen too, Grove clapped on his hat. "Nope. Because I wanted to show up here after supper, and all pranked out with a shave and clean duds, I made camp yonder 'bout a mile. I'll come back in the morning, and if Kate's willing we'll light a shuck."

Sam turned in the doorway. "Kate won't light no shuck out of here. She's got all her buttons, even if you ain't. G'night."

Mad enough to tromp on baby chickens, Grove forked his horse and hit out for camp. "Stubborn old rumdum," he growled, then fell to thinking thoughts bitter as alkali dust. Why was Kate ricocheting around with a scaly buzzard like Nick Bercaw, when anybody not too blind to see through a wire fence could tell that Bercaw was just fixing himself a lifelong soft corner on the Cinch-Buckle spread?

Now Kate was pretty enough to set fire

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to wet hay, all right; but Bercaw was too cold-blooded a formation to come unwired over just a comely gal. No, Bercaw had his hard-as-gun-muzzles eyes on the wealth that old Sam Ridenour had stacked up in the twenty-odd years since trailing a jag of longhorns up from Texas.

And, being sharp as a cactus stab, old Sam likely knew it, but was so all-fired anxious to leave Cinch-Buckle in capable hands that he didn't give a hoot. Though tough as a winter in Saskatchewan, Bercaw was an ace-high cowman; no two ways about that.

Though Grove had come a far piece since sunup, he couldn't sleep. He lay restless in his soogans, listening to the coyotes, and the wind blowing lonesome through the cottonwoods along the creek. This sure was hell with the hide off. Anxious to get up home, he had thought to tie onto Kate and line out tomorrow, stopping long enough at Lost Spring to get hitched. Now, though, it looked as though he'd have to hang around a day or so while old Sam rattled his horns and jawed. That is, unless Kate paid her papa no never-mind at all.

But, when he showed up at the ranch house next morning, it was plain as paint that Kate was sure going to heed her old man. "Look, you big moose," she scolded, pulling out of his arms as violently as she'd gone in. "How come you got crosswise of Papa? You know what store he sets by me and this place, so just forget that notion of running horses up yonder. We'll live right here and—"

"But, great snakes!" With both hands on her shoulders he held her off, wanting to shake her till that mop of red hair fell down. "You agreed to all that the night we made medicine right here on this porch."

"I know." She looked sorry as ducks in Arizona. "Could be it was the moonlight. But I see now that—"

"No dice, Kate. I don't see it any different than I did then. That covers it like a carpet."

With an angry jerk she freed herself from his grasp. Her chin was high as a turkey's tail. Her eyes were green fire. "Then you don't want me very much!"

"I do so. I want you like Death Valley wants water; but I want my own place, too."

AT ONCE she went tender again, and back into his arms. "Please, Grove," she murmured. "I'd like that little spread of yours, and your own house and all; but we've got to humor Papa. Try it here, and if it doesn't work out—" She sort of choked up then, and gripped him tighter.

Steady, bud, he warned himself, breathing hard and trying to keep cool as Laramie Peak way over yonder.

Lifting his head to clear his face of her ticklish hair he glimpsed through the vines at the end of the porch, Nick Bercaw bowlegging toward the barn. *If I don't play my cards right that flyblown buzzard will get her,* he thought. *Maybe right now I'd better—*

"All right," he agreed, loosing a sigh as phony as a three-dollar bill, and knowing doggone well that her show of emotion wasn't quite hundred-proof either.

He'd broken camp and brought his outfit along that morning, and after turning the three horses (he'd said nothing about the young Morgan gelding being a present for Kate) into the pasture, and lugging his bed into the bunkhouse, he found Sam tinkering around one of the corrals. "Well, guess I've got no out but to try and make a hand for you," he grinned.

Sam looked a bit skeptical. "How do I know you won't pull foot the minute you've dabbed a loop on Kate?"

Keeping his eyes on the smoke he was rolling, Grove wagged his head. "Not unless you fire me. To show you I'm not aiming to saw off a job like you mention, I'll sign a contract."

"Contract!" Sam snorted. "Hell, over the years I've agreed to buy and sell thousands of head of cows, and never bothered with no papers. A man's word should be enough."

"That's right, so let's make it verbal. What you paying your top hands?"

"Thirty and found."

"Keno. That's beans'n bacon every day

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plus three hundred sixty a year payable in a dozen monthly installments. To keep things simple we'll just talk about the first year now. At the end of twelve months you can fire me."

"Or you can quit?"

"Nope, I won't have that privilege. All I want is your leave to marry Kate the first chance we have to ride over to Lost Spring. Let's shake on it." The two horny hands clasped, and the deal was closed.

"Now," Sam ordered, turning back to his chore, "go yonder and help Quade shoe that bronc. After Bercaw comes back this afternoon he'll keep you busy as a bartender on Sat'day night."

Over by the blacksmith shop Pete Quade had thrown a big dun gelding preparatory to tacking on shoes. Not at all liking the procedure the gelding was thrashing about like a chicken with a wrung neck. "Sid-down on his head, will you, friend," Quade panted.

"Sure." Down Grove sat; and, thus further handicapped, the dun quieted a bit.

Moving his tool-box closer Quade squatted, got an equine foot in position and went to work with a hoof-rasp. Then, unexpected as a fifth ace, Grove got up. All at once and nothing first the bronc got up, too; and—though somewhat hampered by a tangle of ropes— he lossed an angry squeal and set about venting his ire. Having gone tail-over-brisket along with his scattered tools, Quade got the seat of his skin-tight jeans through the fence just a shade ahead of the bronc's bared teeth.

Now perched safely on the high top rail of the same fence, Grove managed to look surprised as a pup with its first porcupine. "I be dog," he said, staring blankly at Sam who had arrived on a high lope.

"Great smoking hell-fire, I thought you savvied horses!" Sam roared.

BY THAT time Quade had got himself unpinned from a patch of prickly pear which he'd happened into, and what he was saying would have taken the frost out of a zero morning. Among other things, he mentioned the fact that the Cinch-Buckle spread was too tight a fit for himself and a hammer-head like the newcomer. One of them would have to go.

Ignoring the threat of losing one of his top hands, Sam beckoned Grove down from his perch. "Look, chump," he said through his teeth. "Here's a job of work maybe even you can do without tearing the shebang up by the roots. Yonder in the pasture (likely shading themselves by that cottonwood) you'll find five-six friendly old broomtails which are lifeless as frozen snipes. Wake 'em up and slap pack-saddles on 'em; and tote a dozen sacks of rock salt over onto the lease." He waved a paw vaguely toward the ten thousand acres of grassy hills across the creek.

"Now?" Grove flicked a glance at the sun nearing high center. "Most time for chow."

"Now," Sam insisted. "A good cowhand don't bother none about meals when there's work to be did. Vamoose!"

Moving no faster than a snail climbing a slick tog, Grove saddled his Teddy horse, corraled the sleepy pack-string and lugged the cross-bucks and lash-ropes from their shed. From the barn he carried the big gunny-bags filled with rock salt, too; left the whole works in the corral, and sought rest in the shade of a cottonwood near the rear wall of the house. Lying flat on the little patch of grass there, he dragged his hat down over his eyes, but kept his ears cocked.

He could hear Sam inside the house, and Sam wasn't talking to himself like a sheep-herder. He was jawing at Kate, but Kate wasn't saying a word. Grove began to wonder a little uneasily if perhaps he hadn't got his spurs tangled in trying to iron out his troubles this way. Maybe Kate's silence indicated agreement with her old man that Grove Terrell was too dumb to pour sand out of a boot.

Shortly Sam's stamping about brought him near the open window overlooking Grove's bed-ground, and what he saw all but choked him. "C'mere'n look, Kate," he ordered. "Here's just what I been saying. That there's the damnedest good-for-nothing—"

"He's *not* a good-for-nothing!"

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That prompt and unexpected defense by his gal sure heartened the subject under discussion. With face hidden under the dusty Stetson he grinned like a baked possum.

". . . then he's the nearest thing to it in all Wyoming," Sam was sputtering. "Git up there, you—"

As though a scorpion had crawled down his neck, Grove scrambled up. "Gosh, what you yelling about?"

"Now you just listen here, Papa!" Kate's temper was now crackling like the joints of blue-stem grass in a prairie fire. "I expect he's still tired from fighting those Spaniards, and being in the hospital and all. Right after dinner he'll start with that salt—"

"He'll start right now!" Sam declared.

A puncher called Dallas had just sauntered up from the corral. "Sam," he drawled, hitching at his chaps. "Somebody left some sacked salt penned up with them pack-ponies. The ponies has tore the sacks off into doll-rags, and are usin' up that salt like—"

But Grove had drifted off, and by the time the cook had whanged the iron tire outside the mess shack door, he'd resacked the salt and started out. . . .

ALONG in the shank of the afternoon he returned, policed himself, and hunkered down near the cook shack doorway to await supper. Later, Bercaw got back from wherever he'd been, and it was plain as plowed ground that he was in a mood to fight a buzz-saw. "Sam!" he called while still a far piece from the house. "Who'n the yelling hell put that salt on the lease?"

As though but two jumps ahead of an on-the-prod bull, Sam shot out of the house. "Him," he said, pointing to Grove. "Why?"

Having halted just a horse-length short of the cook shack door, Bercaw rested balled fists on his hips. The eyes he swung on Grove were blazing with jealous hatred. "Right from the first time I ever seen you I knowed you were useless as an alarm clock in a cemetery," he announced. "Don't you savvy that salt is always put up along the benches and ridges so that the stock will graze from it down to water and back? You dumped it along the creek, and every critter on the whole ten-thousand acres is high-tailing down for it and won't go using round the high country no more till it's moved."

Having got slowly to his feet, Grove was leaning against the doorpost. Contriving to look utterly carefree he yawned, shrugged, and said nothing.

That kicked the lid off. With a howl like that of a liquored squaw, Bercaw flew at Grove, knocking him backward into the hot little room where the cook was peering at the biscuits in the oven.

"Git!" yelled the cook, swiping at the intruder with the nearest iron ladle.

It landed, not on Grove but on the sunburnt beak of the pursuing foreman. Blood spurted, and with a yelp Bercaw backhanded the spindly little dough-roller into a corner, grabbed the stove-poker and slashed at Grove who had regained his feet.

Grove was no longer fooling. This was one of the things he'd stayed around to do, this job of fixing the foreman's little red-wheeled wagon. Ducking the poker he charged head-down at Bercaw's middle. As the foreman grunted and jack-knifed, Grove snatched the poker, flung it away, and heard the glass go out of a window.

Ignoring Sam's screamed demands to behave, he stepped back, saw Bercaw gasping for breath and still doubled over. With an uppercut under the chin he straightened him.

Toppling backward, Bercaw crashed into the stove. The rusty pipe broke at the elbow. At once a cloud of soot and choking smoke filled the place. As Bercaw scrambled away from the hot iron, Grove fetched him another swipe, slipped, and down they both slammed like a landslide. The rickety stove went over on its side with a clatter.

By this time the cook had lit out for elsewhere, but otherwise every hand on the place was gathered round outside and making more noise than a bunch of penned-up bull calves. Somebody yelled "Fire!" but Grove was busy trying to get an iron lid-

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lifter away from Bercaw. Missing it with a groping hand, he felt the smash of it against an already lame shoulder, and chopped again with his fist. Bercaw went limp as a wet shirt. "Fire!" someone yelled again, and he and Bercaw were dragged from the now-blazing room.

Later (after he'd shucked his messed-up clothes, cleaned his hide and hair of soot and blood and spilled victuals, and got into a fresh outfit), a grinning puncher told him that Kate was waiting in the house to fix up his hurts.

"And old Sam's waitin' to work you over some more," another hand growled, noting with obvious satisfaction that Grove had more bumps than a summer squash. "We now got no cook shack, no supper, and the foreman is bad crippled as a honkytonk dancer with one leg missing. You been more bother'n a sackful of snakes."

Inside the house, Sam was found to be of the same opinion. "You're fired!" he bawled, stomping round like a rooster on a hot griddle. "Step all over yourself getting off the place."

"All right." Grove seemed calm as a puddle. "Sorry I don't suit, specially as you'n me got that year's contract. However, if you don't want me here I'll be reasonable and let you out of the grub part. Just gimme the three hundred sixty dollars —and I'll drift."

Sam had the reputation of being so tight that he wouldn't have paid two bits to see the Custer fight, and now he looked sick as though he'd been alkalied. "Would you mind dragging that past again?" he gasped.

"I'll take the year's wages, you keep the grub," Grove explained. "Maybe, though, seeing that you're going to be my father-in-law, Kate and I will just clear out and leave the money slide. That's more seemly, I guess."

So glad was Sam to keep his dollars that his mind was working like a wet match. He clean forgot about his daughter. "Sure! Hell, yes!" he agreed, grasping Grove's hand. "Your brains would fit loose in a jaybird, but you're straight as a wagon-tongue. We'll do just as you say."

From the tail of his eye Grove had been watching Kate, seeing the expression on her face change from dismay to amused admiration. At this point she giggled, and Sam's eyes narrowed with sudden suspicion.

Grove, however, continued to look solemn as a watched Puritan, and to shake the old-timer's hand. "We can still make Lost Spring before nightfall, so I guess Kate and I will saddle and ride," he said. "Adios, Mr. Ridenour."

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 56)

1. Montana.
2. Three, occasionally four.
3. Rio Grande.
4. Yes.
5. San Francisco, Calif.
6. A broad leather belt, usually with three or four small tongue buckles, not worn to hold the cowboy's pants up but as a support for the muscles of the wearer's mid-section.
7. He meant to cut out of the herd as culls, all skinny old cows and steers not likely ever to fatten.
8. Oklahoma.
9. No, but many cowboys use bridles with nosebands for easier control of the horse, especially on a bronc just learning the bridle.
10. When staking a raw bronc out to a log or chunk to teach him respect for a rope, a swivel is often used in the stake rope to prevent twisting and kinking.

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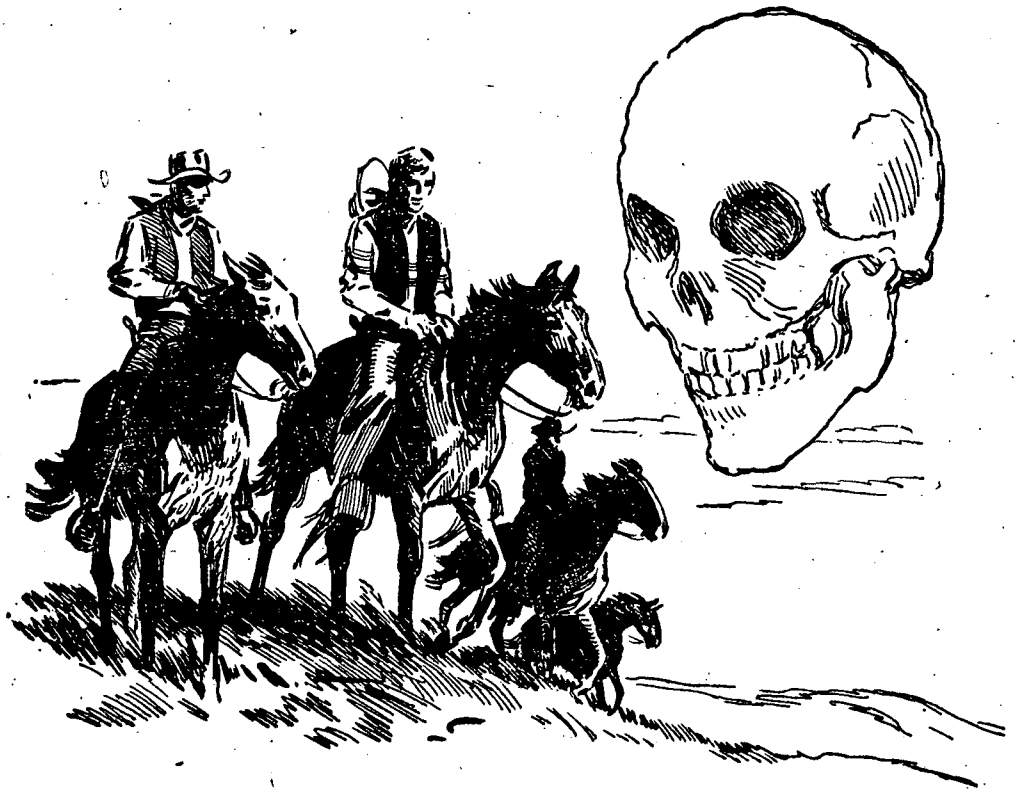

One Night in Old Tascosa

—four reckless horsemen rode into town with Death as guide

IN APRIL, 1952, Texas newspapers caused a ripple of excitement when they carried a story about three men who had been arrested while digging into old Tascosa's famous Boothill cemetery. Even newcomers to the Panhandle felt curious as they read:

> Officers came upon the three men after they had sunk a pit between the graves of two frontier cowboys, Fred Chilton and Frank Valley, and unearthed a pile of bones. The vandals explained they had heard a large sum of money was buried in one of the graves. Chilton and Valley were two of the men who died in the "Big Fight" at Tascosa in 1886.

Old Tascosa! Capital of ten Texas counties, trail boom-town, and trade center of one of the greatest cattle empires on earth.

a true story by **Roberta M. Pate**

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A few old-timers are living who remember, with a thrill of excitement, the lusty, brawling town in her heyday. They recall the "Big Fight," too—as well they might. For sheer savagery it ranks with the Earp-Clanton battle at the Okay Corral, and the blazing showdown at Lincoln, New Mexico, between the Murphy faction and McSween's, led by Billy the Kid.

Mention the "Big Fight" at Tascosa to any old pioneer along the Canadian River and you will see his faded eyes sharpen with interest. Likely as not, he will begin: "The Big Fight at Old Tascosy? Yep, I remember hearing about it. The "little men" and "big men" had been feuding for months, but women touched off the explosion. Jealousy. 'Twas the twentieth of March, a purty spring night, when—"

Spring came early to the Panhandle that year of '86, bringing a plague of heel-flies which drove the maddened cattle into creeks and buffalo wallows for relief. There the critters often bogged down and had to be pulled out. So it was that the huge LS outfit had part of its crew riding bog at that time. Four of the men, Fred Chilton, Frank Valley, Ed King and John Lang, were camped at Jerry Springs, some ten miles from Tascosa. These young fellows were "Home Rangers" as well as cowboys—gunmen hired to keep down rustling.

ON THE twentieth of March a Mexican rode into their camp with a note for Ed King. The heavy-set, darkly-handsome puncher read it eagerly. "It's from Sally," he told the others. "Let's ride into Tascosy, fellers."

The other boys exchanged knowing glances. The glamorous dancehall girl, Sally, had Ed eating right out of her hand. And bitterness was growing between Ed and Lem Woodruff, her old flame. After Sally had thrown him over for Ed, Woodruff had gone for consolation to a rival honkatonk queen, Rocking Chair Emma. This angered the temperamental Sally, and the rumor spread she was egging King on to a showdown with Woodruff.

"There's a *baile* at Romero's" Ed added, after a brief silence.

"Don't go to Tascosa, amigos!" Martinez, the cook, spoke up from the chuck-wagon. His black eyes were full of anxiety. "Sometheeng tell me there will be trouble tonight. Mucho trouble!"

Frank Valley laughed. "Don't worry, hombre. I'll get us a rabbit's foot on the way to town—to bring us luck."

Already the boys were getting into clean clothes. "Poker, monte or dancing—" said John Lang, sleeking down his blond hair, "—I'm in for anything."

Mounted on fresh horses, the four headed for Tascosa. Four reckless, rollicking cowboys, but an invisible horseman rode with them—Death.

Ed King should have sensed his danger. He must have known Woodruff was bitterly jealous of him because of Sally. Once, while drunk, Ed had taunted the man. Moreover, there was deep-rooted enmity between the two because they belonged to different factions. Woodruff was a sympathizer with the "little men"—nesters, cowhands and small ranch owners; Ed, an LS Home Ranger, was allied with the "big men," wealthy ranchers and foreign-owned cattle syndicates.

The two factions had their origin in the Cowboy Strike for higher wages in 1883. The movement had been crushed by the rock-firm stand of the big cattlemen, the more vindictive of whom blacklisted the striking waddies until they couldn't get a job on any ranch. Before this, ranch owners had suspected certain cowboys of "sleepering"—throwing cattle behind round-up crews—and even of altering brands.

That wholesale rustling went on cannot be denied. Feeling they were underpaid, that the big outfits were trying to make peons of them, many cowboys "mavericked" or rustled cattle. Then they started small ranches of their own. Finally, the cattle barons organized in common defense, and called on Pat Garrett, Texas Ranger Captain, to ferret out the rustlers.

GARRETT came to Tascosa and took up headquarters at the LS Ranch. Here he organized, mainly from the ranks of cowboys who had refused to join

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the strike, a band of Home Rangers to help him. Naturally, this incensed the strikers, their nester sympathizers and other "little men." Garrett had friends, but he was unpopular in certain quarters because, a few years before, he had killed Billy the Kid. Once Billy had sojourned in Tascosa and had left a number of friends there. As stock detective, Garrett kept on until the worst rustlers were caught, then turned the business over to the Home Rangers and went home.

Left without Garrett's discipline, the Home Rangers became an unruly crew. They hung about the dance-hall girls, gambled, drank, fought; and were often unruly at dances.

The swagger of the LS Rangers likely stemmed from the fact their great ranch was such a power in the country. The LS ranch had loaned Oldham County the money to erect a courthouse at Tascosa, then bought up half the townsite and deeded each trusted LS cowboy a lot in it. J. E. McAlister, ranch manager, was also county judge, and he had a commissioner's court which worked in harmony with him. This court outlawed the newly-registered brands considered most questionable, making such cattle property of the county. McAlister's cowboys helped round up these herds—a procedure which left the "little men" seething with resentment.

The ill-will they had aroused did not bother the four boys jogging toward Tascosa that March afternoon. But, when a jack rabbit sat up on his haunches beside the trail, Valley remembered Martinez' warning. "Here's where I get my good-luck piece," said the puncher, and drew his gun. When they rode on, Valley had a severed rabbit's foot in his pocket.

LS range spread about the riders, its slopes turning green with young grass. The earthy tang of spring was in the air. As the sun went down, Tascosa came in view—a cluster of adobe buildings outlined against the copper-colored waters of the Canadian. Lights from a dozen windows seemed to wink at the boys, and they grinned at each other. It was good to be back in town, good to be alive!

AFTER they had slaked their thirst at a saloon, Ed left his companions playing cards and went to keep his date with Sally. A pretty brunette, the young woman greeted him warmly, but what conversation passed between them has never been recorded. Finally, Ed left her to attend a *baile* in a home outside town where Billy the Kid had danced a few years before. The LS punchers spent hours there, dancing; then, after midnight, the boys rode back to Tascosa. They had heard a poker game was going on at Griffin's Saloon, and wanted to play a few more hands—and Ed wanted to see Sally again.

The girl met him and John Lang on Main Street. Ed handed his bridle reins to Lang, dismounted, slipped an arm around Sally's waist. Then, the couple started walking toward her home. But several men, Lem Woodruff among them, were watching from the shadowy porch of the nearby Dunn-Jenkins Saloon, run by Louis Bousman. As Ed and Sally approached them, someone made a remark that stopped the puncher in his tracks. "Go on home, Sally," he said tightly. "I'll be along later." He walked toward the porch.

Suddenly a gun barked.

John Lang, who was leading the horses to a stockade, whirled in time to see Ed spin on his feet and fall, face up. Before Lang could move, Lem Woodruff was towering over the prone figure, pressing a Winchester against it.

As the second bullet cut into Ed's body, Lang came out of his paralysis, wheeled and ran to Griffin's Saloon. There he found one of the LS punchers standing on a table singing "Down By Narraganset Bay" while the other beat time. "Come on, boys!" yelled Lang. "They've killed Ed! Let's get 'em!" Instantly, Chilton and Valley were beside him, sixguns drawn.

Behind the Dunn-Jenkins Saloon, Lem Woodruff, Charley and Tom Emory, Louis Bousman, a gambler known as the Catfish Kid, and probably other "little men" sympathizers, were excitedly discussing what to do next, when the avenging LS trio converged on them. There was a wild scramble for cover. Then an inferno of blasting guns

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broke loose. So terrific was the din, it has been said there were others in the fight whose names were never disclosed.

The fury of the LS attack centered on Woodruff. One bullet penetrated his groin, another his abdomen, severing the appendix. He staggered back into the saloon, managed to close the door. Outside, Charley Emory, badly wounded, was dragging himself into deeper shadows.

Determined to finish Woodruff, Frank Valley charged into the open, pumping lead into the saloon door. No answering shots came from beyond, so Valley opened the door slightly to peer in. That was his mistake. A gun flamed in the dark interior, and Frank fell, mortally wounded. . . .

MEANWHILE, Chilton and Lang, sheltered by a stack of plaster boards, were carrying on a desperate battle with the Catfish Kid and others hunkered down behind a huge woodpile. Suddenly, a door near Chilton opened, and the puncher fired at it, point-blank, gun roaring. Some believed he thought he was killing Bousman.

But the white-clad man who pitched out the door on his face was an innocent bystander, Jesse Sheets, who had been sleeping that night in the back room of his restaurant, adjoining the saloon. Unarmed and in his nightclothes, he had come to the door to see what was going on, and had paid for his curiosity with his life. Very likely Chilton never realized his mistake. An instant later two rifle bullets caught him in the chest. He was dying as he handed his gun to Lang.

Left alone, John Lang began a precarious retreat toward Main Street, firing as he went. Lead whined by him, plunking into adobe walls, splintering window-glass, kicking up sand at his feet. One bullet cut through his coat sleeve. So far he had been lucky, but he soon emptied his guns. "This is it," he thought. But just then Sheriff Jim East and his deputy, L. C. Pierce, rushed up to help him.

A few shots were still coming from various vantage spots and, as Pierce charged the wood-pile, a figure sprang up and started running. "Halt!" barked the deputy. The command being ignored, Pierce fired. That instant luck was with the Catfish Kid. He stumbled and fell—just as the bullet whizzed over him. Pierce ran up and the wily gambler put on an act. He groaned, rolled his eyes, twitched convulsively, faked the death rattle in his throat. Pierce, convinced the man was shot and dying hurried away to help round up the other gunmen, whereupon Catfish jumped up and ran off.

Bousman and Charley Emory were soon apprehended, the former at his home, the latter, suffering and half-conscious, in a blacksmith's shop. Woodruff was missing. Later, he was found at a friend's home which he'd managed to reach by using his Winchester as a crutch for his bullet-mangled body. He lay there for weeks hovering between life and death, and never fully recovered from his wounds. The Catfish Kid finally surrendered.

Every home in Tascosa was deeply affected by the fight, and feeling ran high at ranches where the dead cowboys had many friends. The LS crew of fifty-five men loped into town crying for vengeance. It has been said some of the hot-headed ones wanted to lynch the prisoners and burn Tascosa to the ground. But law-abiding citizens backed Sheriff East to a man, and his cool, efficient handling of the situation, plus the cooperation of McAlister and W. M. D. Lee, co-owner of LS, who wanted the law to take its course, very likely averted a clash more deadly than the Lincoln County War.

The four slain men were buried in Boothill Cemetery, Sheets apart from the others. Everyone sympathized deeply with Mrs. Sheets and her five children whose whole world had crashed because of a quarrel in which none of them had any part. People for miles around attended the funerals, men on horseback, families in buckboards. The old LS hack was in the procession, and nerves were keyed to a high pitch. But deputized men were everywhere, determined to keep the peace. . . .

Murder charges were filed against Woodruff, Charley Emory, the Catfish Kid, Bousman and Lang. The first trial, held at

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Clarendon resulted in a hung jury; the second, at Mobeetie was one of the most turbulent in Panhandle history and resulted in acquittal for all five defendants.

They returned to a Tascosa that was dying. "Dying of barbed-wire strangulation," as one writer* put it. The big ranches were fencing, blocking trade routes that had nurtured this town of the open range. The first railroad missed the town by fifty miles, after which came the Canadian River flood of 1893. About the only two buildings left standing were the rock courthouse and the dobe shack of the well-known, well-loved monte dealer Frenchie McCormick, who refused to leave the town where her husband lay buried.

The county seat was moved to Vega; Tascosa's day was done. But she had contributed much to the Panhandle's settlement, mothering villages, other county seats, and large industrial cities like Amarillo. Along the Canadian many great cattle ranches were being broken up into smaller ones, or into grain fields. The era of the stock farmer had dawned; the "little men" were getting stronger.

While these changes took place, Tascosa remained a ghost town. A farmer came in and planted squash on grounds that had been fertilized by blood of fighting men. Then, in the late thirties, Julian Bivins, a well-to-do rancher, donated the townsite to the Maverick Club, an organization founded by public spirited citizens of Amarillo to help underprivileged boys. Tascosa's old rock courthouse became headquarters for this "Boys' Ranch," where youngsters today receive vocational training along with moral guidance.

Big ranchmen throughout the region have given generously of their wealth to this worthy project. In helping those less fortunate, they are helping the "little men." Enmity between the two factions is dead. As for Tascosa—she makes the headlines only when some famous old-timer visits her, or when vandals dig into Boothill. But, through "Boys' Ranch," she is still doing her bit for the country. Out of a bloody past, the Panhandle has beaten its pistols into plowshares.

*Walter Prescott Webb, in Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Vol. 50.

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THE LONG TRAIL

LONG ignored in blind hope by the trail drivers, the warnings were found to be true. The cattle market in Kansas was dead. The buyers at the rail ends showed no interest in the big herd of mixed steers and range cows.

The grim prediction had been voiced often in the past by many Texas cattlemen. The Eastern markets

HE WAS RUNNING AWAY FROM a broken heart, and almost got a broken neck in the process. . . .

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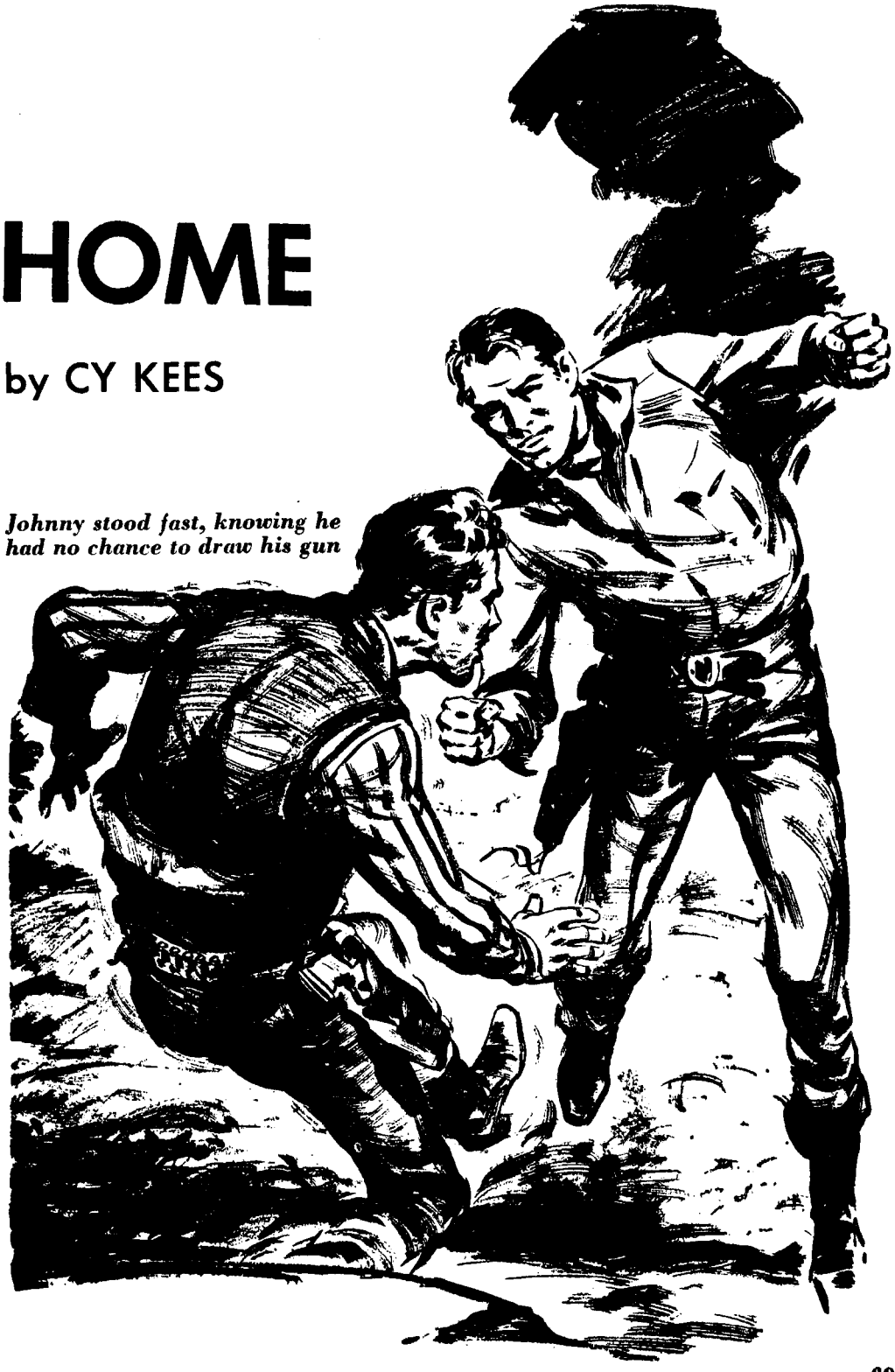
HOME

by CY KEES



Johnny stood fast, knowing he had no chance to draw his gun

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were glutted with Texas beef, and another market would have to be found. Cursing his crew back to the herd, owner Sam Draper headed them north.

"If we can't find a buyer in Colorado, we'll go on to Wyoming," he barked, as they cut out horses for the day. "We'll sell this herd if we have to go clean to Montana!"

"Pay me up and you can take 'em clean to hell for all I care," Limpy Mathews gritted, favoring his game leg more than ever. "Give me the money I've earned already, and I'll stay right here."

"You made a deal, and you'll stick to it." A grin flattened Draper's mouth. "Stick till we get to market and you'll get paid in full. Quit now and you get nothing."

From the side where he was taking it all in, Johnny Jordon grinned wryly. It took a rancher as hard-bitten as Sam Draper to ram a deal like that down their throats. But the grizzled, greedy old rancher had made them agree to it, and now he'd make them stick to it till the end. Limpy cinched his saddle and turned again, lips twisted bitterly.

"When I made that deal, I didn't figure on rampsin' all over North America lookin' for a market." He crouched, and his right hand curled around the butt of the .45 riding his thigh. "And I'm not so damned sure I won't take my pay right now!"

The crew hushed suddenly, frozen in the positions the words had caught them. There was an ugly purr in Limpy's voice, the furious throatiness of a man who has been driven too far. They stared. Sam Draper crouched too, a little uncertain, his own hand close to his holstered gun.

"Cut that out—right now!"

His sandy hair bristling, Flint McAlester strode between them, and his presence broke the tension. Cursing, Limpy flung himself on his mount and rode out to the herd. Johnny Jordon chuckled in relief, even while he felt a fresh surge of hatred at the sight of McAlester.

The overgrown foreman never missed a chance to put himself in stronger with his boss. His thumbs hooked into his gunbelt, McAlester stood talking to Draper, his head bowed a little as if he was afraid he would miss a word of what Draper was saying. Then he straightened up, slapped his holstered gun.

"If he gives you any more trouble, I'll run him down the road," McAlester snapped, and he walked back to his horse.

Pulling the cinch tight, Johnny cursed the day he hired on to help drive the trail herd. The first sharp pain of losing Dolly was gone now. He had been a fool to think he could escape the nagging hurt of it this way.

But he had hired on back in Texas, and he would see the herd through to market. Ruefully, he shook his head. When he got back to his ranch, he would really appreciate it. Even without the golden-haired Dolly, it would be a treat just to be back home. While he mounted, he glanced at Draper. The cattleman was poring over figures in a dog-eared notebook.

EVEN if he had been loco to leave his ranch in an effort to forget, he deserved more than he had gotten. From years of habit, the grizzled Draper was as greedy as a half-starved brush hog, driving the last bitter dollar's worth out of every man he hired.

And his foreman, Flint McAlester, was worse, trying to be even tighter than his boss to make a good impression. Driven too hard by the two men, the crew was fast becoming surly, hard-bitten. Except for the crippled Limpy, there wasn't a man in the crew Johnny could call friend.

And now Limp was fed up and fast heading for a showdown with Draper and McAlester. Johnny scowled.

They would probably all have quit, if it hadn't been for the deal Draper had insisted they make. Either they stuck with him till he found a market, or they forfeited what pay they had coming. The money came too hard, and none of the crew would leave the drive as long as they could possibly sit a horse. It began to look like a long trail ahead.

"Sucker bait—the whole fool batch of us," Johnny muttered, and he rode out to the herd.

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The crew roused the cattle out of their bedding grounds, and the herd was ready to move. Flint McAlester rode up, yelling orders. They pointed the herd North.

By late afternoon, choked with dust in the drag, Johnny's mind shifted with treacherous insistence to Dolly. All day he had tried to keep her out of his thoughts. But now stiff and numbed from hours in the saddle, he couldn't help thinking about her.

She had always been so cool and fresh, such a wholesome sight to behold. As the daughter of the wealthy Clax Bord, she had been able to spend all her time keeping herself that way. That's why it had been so hard to believe that she had run away to marry—and to a no-good card shark at that. But she had.

"I know I told you I loved you, Johnny," she had said, a new, a hard glint in her hazel eyes. "But I was younger then. With all the fun and excitement I can have, why should I settle down to a deary life on a ranch with a lot of squalling brats and dirty dishes?"

Johnny guessed she didn't know that with each word something precious died in him. If Dolly had, she wouldn't have laughed right then. And then she had laughed, a mocking laugh. "No, that isn't the life for me," she added.

"My wife's babies aren't going to be brats," Johnny had said coldly. "And the dishes won't be dirty long because my girl'll have enough ambition to wash them!"

Dolly colored a little then, but her nose wrinkled with ill-concealed distaste. "I guess that's enough, Johnny. You can go now."

"Glad to." He had whirled his horse to go. "I hope you have lots of fun, Dolly, because you'll find out that's not enough to get out of life."

"Don't worry, Johnny. I will—and it is!"

AT FIRST, totally disgusted with her, it had been easy to keep her off his mind. But when spring came, old memories crept uninvited into his mind, and they made him lonely and miserable.

It wasn't so much the many pleasant moments he had spent with Dolly. It was the way he had always dreamed of how wonderful life would be with her. In every plan he had made for the future, Dolly Bord had been at his side, sharing in it. When he had found out she would have no part of his dream for the future, it had suddenly become empty, aimless.

Finally, dogged with a nagging restlessness, he had signed to help drive the Draper herd. He should have been warned when Draper had such a hard time getting a crew. There was lots of foot-loose cowboys, and jobs were scarce.

Now, choking out dust in the drag, Johnny decided he had picked a hell of a poor way to patch his heart. Already on the trail for weeks, there was no end in sight. And any man who weakened now would forfeit all his hard-earned money.

The stars were out before they bedded the herd down that night. Feeling as empty as a barrel, Johnny staggered into camp for chuck.

The crew ate greedily, wasting no words. But when the meal ended, the silence carried on. There were no yarns, no horseplay. All their humor had been left far back on the cattle trail.

Limp and Flint McAlester exchanged glares again, the foreman bristling and restless, Limpy sullen and dangerous. Almost simultaneously, a buckskin garbed rider rode in from the north; and a young girl drove a rickety wagon out of the darkness from the west.

The whole crew gaped from one to the other, nobody saying a word. Sam Draper glanced at the girl, hesitated, then turned his attention to the mounted rider. In the uncertain light from the campfire, he sized up the rider. Draper grinned.

"Step down and have a bite," he said, with a gruff attempt to be hearty. "If these wolves ain't finished it all."

"Thanks, name's Crown," the rider said as he dismounted stiffly, like a man who had spent long hours in the saddle without rest.

From his position in the deeper shadows away from the fire, Johnny Jordon turned his attention back to the girl. At first she

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returned the open stares of the crew. But gradually her eyes dropped down to the ribbons in her small, tanned hands, and she braided them nervously.

A young boy had moved up to the seat beside her. Watching them hawkishly from bright blue eyes, he gripped a beat-up rifle. He didn't point it at anyone, but Johnny guessed he would be quick to do it if some danger or unwelcome attention threatened the girl. Limpy sidled in close to him in the darkness.

"You heard Draper ask Crown to eat?" Limmpy grinned tightly. "It hurt him to do it, but he wanted information. And he sure got it." With a secretive air about him, Limpy edged closer. "I heard Crown say there's a band of renegade Sioux on the trail ahead."

Johnny listened to him, but the news didn't move him. He couldn't keep his gaze from the girl in the weatherbeaten wagon. The bony team sagged, hipshot in the harness, looking like they might decide any minute to drop in their tracks. The girl's hands moved slower, still idly braiding and unbraiding the lines. It aroused sudden anger in him, and Johnny pushed off the ground.

"Hey, Draper," he yelled, "if you can manage to get through jawing, you might see what the gal wants."

Draper, Crown and McAlester broke out of their furtive huddle near the fire. McAlester glared at him, tight fists bunched at the end of long arms. He came a couple steps closer.

"You might watch your lip, Jordon," he growled. "Or you'll get a fist in the teeth."

IGNORING the quick challenge in McAlester's tone and words, Johnny laid back again. They had plenty of trouble on the drive without stirring up more between themselves. Draper grunted, and he broke reluctantly away from the stranger. Frowning, he moved up to the wagon.

"Something you wanted?" he asked gruffly.

"Are you the owner of the herd?" At the first sound of her voice, cool and sweet, Johnny's heart stirred, and he leaned closer to make sure he missed none of the exchange.

Draper nodded. "Yeah, worse's the luck. What about it?"

"I'm Peggy Willoughby," she said. She glanced at the boy beside her. "And this is my brother, Spud. We come from Pine Junction—it's about five miles west of here." She smiled, a quick flash of white teeth in the uncertain light. "It's a farming community."

"Nesters, eh?" Draper grunted. She seemed to wait for some encouragement to go on, but she didn't get any. She bit her lower lip and swallowed.

"We heard you don't have the time to care for the calves born on a drive like this. I wonder—if any are born while you're here, could we have them?"

Every morning someone had the sickening job of shooting newborn calves which came with every night's bedding down. He hadn't had to do it yet, and Johnny was happy to hear that someone would take them off the crew's hands.

Her request had been so appealing, it could hardly be refused. But already Draper was shaking his grizzled head.

"I'd like to help you," he said shortly. "But we don't have any."

It was an outright lie, and quick mutters arose from the crew. They knew Draper was lying, so did Crown, and from the way Peggy Willoughby's dark eyes leveled at Draper, so did she.

"Are you sure?" She seemed to slump lower in the driver's seat. "It was a long ride out here, and we were kind of hoping. . . ."

"I'm sorry, Miss," Draper said gruffly. "We don't have any."

The stranger, Crown, stared at the cattleman for a long moment. Then he stomped back to his horse, tightened the cinch again on the weary animal. Mounting, he glanced back, eyes flaring.

"I'm a little bushed, and I wanted a place to bed down," he said softly. "But I reckon I'll meander on into town." He shook his head. "Never slept good in a short sport outfit. I halfways hope those Sioux get your beef now, but you better

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take my advice and hold up that herd."

"We ain't stopping for a couple dozen half-baked redskins," McAlester jeered, seeming ready and eager to squabble with Crown. "This is a man's outfit, bucko, a match for any amount of Injuns."

Crown eyed him up and down a moment longer. He said something more, but Johnny couldn't make out the words. Watching the girl tool the team around, he dropped deeper into the shadows and started circling to head her off.

Impulsively, he rushed through the blackness. The team shuffled along, and the girl looked beaten, dispirited in the seat. He hurried up to her, and the team slowed to a stop.

When he got close, the rifle in the boy's hands swiveled quickly, covering him. Johnny smiled and kept a respectful distance.

"My name's Johnny Jordon," he said. "I heard what you wanted, and I'd like to help you if I can." She straightened a little, and there was ready interest in her dark eyes.

She looked tall enough in the seat. But there was a slenderness about her body that hinted of a lot of hard work, and probably not enough of the right food. It aroused a deep interest in him to help her if he could. Johnny glanced around at the surrounding darkness.

"You planning on camping out here tonight?"

She nodded. "We can't make it back to town, so I guess we'll have to."

"I've got the last guard on the herd tonight," he said, already planning feverishly. "If there's any calves born, we're supposed to drag them out and shoot them before we come in for chuck." He took a step closer, and the rifle barrel followed him. "There's a brush thicket about a quarter mile west of the herd. You be there, early, and I'll see what I can do to get you some calves."

"We'll be there, with the wagon," she said eagerly. He turned quickly to go then, and her voice came to him from out of the darkness. "And thanks a million—Johnny."

GLOWING with quick warmth, he sneaked back into camp. The stranger was disappearing into the night, and the crew was milling around, getting ready to hit their bedrolls. Draper and McAlester had their heads together, and hadn't seemed to notice his short absence. But Limpy had a tight grin on his face.

"A full moon and a sweet gal," he said, looking hastily around to see if anyone was close. "What the hell you doing back so quick?"

"The kid's got a hungry rifle," Johnny said lightly. He thought of Dolly, and he sobered. He shrugged. "Anyhow, those sweet gals can turn out to be awful sour."

"Oh, so that's it," Limpy said, peering at him. "Wondered why you always had that dying sheep look in your eyes. You leave a gal back in Texas?"

"She left me—in Texas." Not caring to talk more about it, Johnny turned away to his soogans. But Limpy followed him right up, his eyes bright and curious.

"You never said anything about that."

Limpy's voice invited him to talk about it. Johnny guessed he wanted to hear of romance, to spice his own barren life.

"She was beautiful; she had everything she wanted—and she threw it all away for a two-bit tinhorn. That's about all there is to it."

"Well, that's why I always said, money's a bad thing," Limpy remarked, crawling into his bedroll. "Look at Draper—look what money does to him. Ain't even human. When gals got it, they don't have to do any work. And work is what makes the backbone, believe me on that, Johnny. Having to work is the best thing that can happen to a man."

Limpy was right there, Johnny thought, gazing up at the stars. But if Limpy really believed it, why was he always growling when he had to work? Then he thought of the wizened rider's crippled leg, and was ashamed for the thought.

Whether he grumbled a lot or not, Limpy was still the whitest man in the crew. And too good to work for a nickel-pincher like Sam Draper.

The crew dropped off to sleep one by one,

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and the night noises filled the air. The campfire's glow died out gradually, with a few faint pops when flames bit into the last of the wood. A cool breeze moved past his face. Even though he was dog-tired, Johnny gazed open eyed at the stars, at the full yellow moon lighting the night.

Somewhere in the surrounding darkness, not too far away, the nester girl would be bedding down too and gazing up at the same stars. The thought gave him a strange feeling of companionship, of being closer to her.

Propping himself on one elbow, Johnny rolled and lighted a cigarette. The noise of the contented herd came plainly over the thin night air. For the first time in the long months since Dolly had quit him, he felt a certain contentment.

He had never thought it possible that he might love again. But the first sight of Peggy Willoughby had told him he was wrong. After tomorrow morning, he might never see Peggy again. But in his brief contact with her, she had done him, unknowingly, a great favor.

Having felt stirred by her presence, he dared hope that some day he might find a woman worthy of love. Because her mere presence had done so much for him, Johnny would do everything possible to see that she got what she was here for—those few calves which were due to be shot anyhow. Somewhere out in the night, she

Without hesitation he gathered her slender warmth, held her

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would be sleeping now, depending on him to help her. Sighing, Johnny crushed out the cigarette and laid back. . . . .

A ROUGH hand shook him awake, and he roused himself out of the roll. It was still dark, but the air had the chilly bite which came with very early morning. Shivering, Johnny pulled on his boots and hurried to rope his horse.

Riding out to the herd, Johnny studied the lay of the land. He would be on guard with a rider named Winters until the rest of the crew was rousted out at dawn.

Usually, they shot the calves just before they were ready to start the herd. If the shots startled the cows then, the crew lined them out for the day's drive. But if he sneaked them out ahead of time, Draper would never question it, as long as the nester girl and her brother stayed out of sight.

Catching sight of Winters ahead, Johnny crowded his horse to the puncher's side. A stocky rider, Winters was an unknown quantity to him, civil enough at all times, but never overly friendly.

Winters grunted a greeting.

"You remember that gal who drove in last night?" Johnny asked.

"Ought to." Winters grinned wryly. "The sight of her gave me big ambitions for a home and family. Lost an hour's sleep before I called myself a damned dreamer often enough to believe it!"

Johnny chuckled, and relief filtered through him. From the sound of the puncher's words, it would be easy to get his help.

"You heard what she wanted," Johnny said carefully. "If the cows dropped any calves during the night, I'm going to sneak them out and try to get them to her." He me the rider's quick glance. "You won't say anything?"

Winters thought it over a moment. "Hell no! Why should I? But this is your game, not mine. If you get caught, I didn't know anything about it."

"Fine!" Johnny said. "And thanks, Winters."

"Don't mention it," the puncher said shortly. "Maybe I earn my dollars the hard way, but I don't begrudge the next person a break."

Humming softly, Johnny rode closer, saw the herd bedded peacefully in the quiet night. The thought of being near Peggy Willoughby again aroused a yearning in him, an impatience to have the two hours of night herding passs quickly.

While he rode, he thought mostly of her. It wasn't just the memory of her dark, youthful beauty under the soft light of the stars. Somehow, she gave the impression of having to fight hard for a living, without being armed to do it. And deep inside him, alive and growing, was an urge to protect her, to help her if he could.

The sky grew paler, and the herd started rousing up. Watching for them, Johnny

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spotted a calf shivering over long, wobbly legs. He hoped there would be more—a dozen of them.

Keeping careful track of the time, he waited until there was less than an hour left before the crew came out to the herd. Then he searched for newborn calves.

It was a touchy business, snaking a calf out from the rested herd. In the early light of day, the longhorns were lively, if not restless. If he caused a stampede, Sam Draper would never forgive him the lost pounds. Working slowly, Johnny got his rope on a calf, dragged it clear of the herd.

The cheated cow followed with an angry rush, snorting. Cursing it silently, Johnny edged it back into the herd. They quieted again. Breathing easier, he dragged the calf toward the thicket where he had instructed Peggy Willoughby to wait.

NEAR the thicket he saw the wagon, which had been well hidden. The bony team cropped grass nearby. Two blanketed mounds lay still near the wagon. At the end of his rope, the calf bawled lustily.

A dark head was thrust out of the nearest mound, and she came alive fast, flinging off the blankets. She was still fully dressed in the patched denim. Pausing long enough to pull on two worn boots, she hurried up to him.

She blinked, and rubbed sleep out of her dark eyes. Johnny grinned, jerked his head at the calf now hobbling around on shaky legs at the end of his rope.

"Morning," he drawled. "If you'll hurry up and adopt this one, I'll go back and see if there's any more."

"Oh, how wonderful!" Her quick smile was as cheering as the breaking dawn. "Wait, and I'll get Spud to help you."

But already the boy was out of the blankets. He fingered the rifle a moment, eyeing them. Then he leaned it against the wagon and came over without it.

Dismounting, Johnny untied the calf, carried it over and put it in the bed of the wagon. They tied its legs so it would be forced to stay there.

While he gathered his rope, Peggy Willoughby came up close. Her nearness sent a quick thrill of excitement coursing through him, and he stifled an unruly impulse to gather her in his arms, to hold her for a moment. He was shaken by the warm glow in her dark eyes.

"You . . . you won't get in trouble over this?" she said, concern for his welfare plain in her voice.

"No, no trouble." He met her eyes for an instant. "But even if it did give me some, I'd be glad to take it for—for you," he added impulsively.

She didn't say anything, but she smiled again, beautifully. Driven by an urgency to hurry, Johnny snaked out another calf. Making a careful search of the herd, he could find only one more. Winters loped up, casting nervous glances in the direction of their camp.

"Better not stop for coffee," he warned. "They're going to be hot on your tail the way it is."

"Uh-huh," Johnny muttered, and he hurried the last calf over to the thicket. When he had it tied with the other two in the wagon bed, he turned quickly to go back to his horse.

"Johnny—please wait a second."

THE tone of her voice stopped him even more surely than her words. Her hand touched his arm, and he turned to her. The soft beauty of her face was a bare two feet from his own.

A mile right then would have been too close to her. His heart trip-hammered in his chest, and he stood, frozen. Peggy didn't seem to move, but she came even nearer.

"I want you to know this is the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me." The color rose high, higher in her face. "I'll never see you again—maybe this seems silly, but it's the only way I know to pay you back."

Her small tanned hands pressed against his ears, brought his head downward. Her full lips came up, touched his. Her kiss was as innocent as it was brief, leaving the sweet taste of her mouth on his. She

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stepped back, smiling, and Johnny sighed, long and deeply.

"Gee, for that you can have the whole herd!" he murmured hazily. "Go on, take it!"

"Hey—company!" Spud Willoughby yelled urgently, coming out from behind the wagon.

"Well, ain't this all touching though!"

The sarcastic words jarred him like a bucket of ice water. Cursing silently, Johnny whirled. His face twisted in a mocking grin, Flint McAlester sat his horse near the edge of the thicket.

There was no sign of friendliness on his face. His grin was overbearing as he looked at the girl, the kid, then the three calves bound in the bed of the wagon.

"We could string you up for a stunt like this," McAlester jeered, plainly enjoying the chance he had to deal misery. "But I'll give you a break, Jordon. Wheel those calves off that wagon and shoot 'em in the head." The grin left his face. "Better get at it fast before I change my mind."

Johnny guessed it wouldn't help to argue with McAlester. The big foreman was a bully to the bone, and he wouldn't miss a chance like this. But glancing at the keen disappointment, along with the fear on Peggy Willoughby's face, he had to try.

"Hell, Flint, be a friend," he urged, trying to pull the big ramrod over on his side. "Sam'll never know about this, and it won't hurt him a bit."

For a moment, Flint McAlester hesitated, and Johnny felt a surge of hope. The foreman's eyes softened a little when they stopped on the girl. But he was thinking, and Johnny knew what was on his mind—the danger to his job if Sam Draper found out. His lips thinned.

"You heard what the boss said, Jordon." The brief chance was gone now. "If you wouldn't have been so damned sneaky about it, I might've let it go. That and having to listen to your big mouth ever since we started this drive. Go on—get it over with pronto."

"No," Johnny said, without thinking it over. "I won't do it."

"You won't, eh?" His eyes flaring, McAlester dismounted, stomped toward the wagon. "I'll do it myself then, and settle with you later."

Taking three quick steps, Johnny stepped between the foreman and the wagon. Determination rose high in him, and he shook his head.

"No, I don't reckon you will, Flint."

"Please, Johnny, don't get into—"

"Quiet," he ordered, before she could finish. "I'll handle this."

Flint McAlester didn't waste words. Big shoulders hunched, he charged ahead, fists held wide and ready.

CHILLING at the sight, Johnny braced, swung his right fist, hard. It landed solidly under McAlester's chin, stopping short the force of his rush. Sharp pain lanced the length of his arm, and he saw McAlester's head snap far back. Sensing his advantage, Johnny closed in, powered two punches into the foreman's wide middle.

Gagging, McAlester fell back, pawing air, desperately trying to reset himself. Relentlessly, knowing his job was lost now along with his wages, Johnny rushed in again.

McAlester pawed in an awkward lunge, caught him in his long arms. Wrenching away, Johnny stumbled, went to one knee. Knowing McAlester would stomp him into the ground if he could, he threw himself sideways, flipped back to his feet.

At the same instant, the big ramrod's Colt cleared leather, and Johnny found himself staring into the round muzzle. Breathing harshly, McAlester spat blood.

"One second it takes to get the drop on a man," he grated, his voice husky with rage. "And that's all it'll take me to send you to hell!"

It had gone too far. Panting, Johnny stood fast, knowing he had no chance for his own holstered .45. Before he could bring it into play, McAlester's ready slug would smash the life out of him. Johnny waited, trying to see a chance for himself, knowing he had none.

"Now, damn you!" McAlester steadied the shotgun.

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"Hold that, mister!" a new voice broke in, the shrill voice of a kid. "I've got you lined up!"

Johnny whirled. He saw Peggy standing there, face pale, and she was shivering. Then he spotted the rifle barrel poked out from behind the wagon. McAlester saw it too. His eyes widened, but the tension didn't break. It tightened.

"Why, you scrawny brat!" McAlester's eyes flitted over the wagon. But there was only the rifle barrel, and the eye peering intently over the sights. The big foreman sneered. "This is a man's game. Stay out of it if—"

"Talk to this rifle, not to me. That's what you'll answer to!"

It was a kid's voice, but there was a man's purpose in it. Running horses sounded closer, and they all stood rooted, none of them knowing what move to make.

Horses broke into the thicket, with Sam Draper leading the way, two of the crew following. Draper reined in, his shrewd eyes running over the scene, and they seemed to take in everything with one long glance. He jerked his head at McAlester.

"Put up the smokepole, Flint," he barked. "I'll take care of this."

Growling, McAlester holstered the gun. Johnny met his eyes, and they were hot and smoldering. McAlester was obeying orders, but he didn't want to. Shrugging, Johnny turned his attention back to Draper.

There was a tight smile on the old cattleman's face, but his eyes were cold. Behind his grizzled face was the miser's brain. He would be thinking of some way to make a profit out of this.

"You disobeyed my orders, Jordon," he said carefully. "For that I've got the right to send you down the road without pay, according to our agreement. Right?"

Grudgingly, Johnny nodded. According to the tight-fisted agreement, Draper was right. Draper grinned and relaxed in the saddle.

"Well, I'm a generous man and won't do that," he said, a thin edge of sarcasm in his voice. "You want her to have those calves so bad, fine. You pay for them." His voice took a harsh edge. "You got about sixty bucks pay coming. You forfeit that and she can have the calves. Otherwise we'll shoot them and you're fired, without the wages."

Johnny thought fast. Either way he lost the wages for which he had sweated endless hours. But he might as well let her have the calves. With a warm glow, he remembered her kiss. Peggy had paid for them—double.

He considered appealing to any generous feeling that might be dormant in Draper. But he knew it was useless, as long as there was a dollar to be grubbed. Peggy moved up closer to him, glaring at Draper, her full lips quivering.

"Don't do it, Johnny," she said. "Let him have the calves."

"That ain't the deal," Johnny said, giving her a quick smile. "He's got me over a barrel, and he knows it." He scowled at Draper. "All right, you got me whipped. Take the wages."

ONE of the crew dismounted to help her harness the horses. When her brother took the lines and clucked the team into motion, she looked back at him. She didn't say anything, or wave, but her eyes held his until brush cut off the view.

"Maybe that'll teach you to take orders and mind your own damned business," Draper snapped. He turned his horse back toward the herd. "Come on! Get moving. We've wasted too much time already!"

Johnny laughed. He laughed long and loud. For the first time in weeks, he felt free of strain, and it was a good feeling. Draper eyed him owlishly, brows wrinkled in puzzlement.

"What the hell's so damned funny?"

"You," Johnny said. "You don't have a paycheck hanging over my head anymore. You didn't really think I'd keep working for you, did you?" He waited. "Well, did you?"

"Of course I did. Come on now and quit that craziness."

Johnny mounted his horse, and Draper sighed in evident relief. Grinning, Johnny

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headed toward the horse wrangler, ordered him to cut out his own two horses.

While he transferred the saddle from the ranch mount to his own, Draper rode up. A frown wrinkled his forehead, and he shifted uneasily in the saddle.

"Listen, Jordon, you made a deal," he said, trying to make his voice sound reasonable. "Why not be a man and stick to it?"

"Sure, I made a deal," Johnny said, pulling the cinch tight. "I paid twenty bucks apiece for three calves." He grinned tightly. "Stiff price, wasn't it?"

"Well, you asked for it." Draper glanced out at the herd starting the northward trek. "I guess you know if you quit now, you're lettin' all of us down."

"Can't see it," Johnny said shortly. "Anyhow I'm doing it because you let the gal down."

"What in hell could she expect from me?"

Johnny hesitated, thinking. "If nothing else, she had the right to expect you to act human."

"I got to look after my own hide too." Draper's voice had dropped until it was almost wheedling. "You know yourself the markets are scarce. Why should I give away calves now and then have to buck them later at the few markets left?"

"That beef would've never got past their supper table, and you know it." Johnny glared up at him. "If my help's so blamed precious, why don't you pay for it?"

"Because you made a deal, that's why." Draper said vehemently, then managed to calm himself. "The rider that was here last night said we'd pass renegade Sioux someplace in the next twenty miles. You can't leave a man in the lurch now."

"I don't see anyone around here big enough to stop me, and that includes your overgrown foreman," Johnny told him. But he thought it over, and he weakened. "You paying my wages?"

Draper fidgeted around in his saddle, his lips pressed tight. Johnny let him squirm, feeling that for once blood was about to be squeezed from a turnip. But still Draper hesitated. "You're reneging on your promise, damn you," he growled.

"Guess so," Johnny agreed quickly. "So you take that sixty dollars for the calves. Now, here's my deal. I'll stay on one condition. You pay me a hundred dollars bonus when the herd's sold."

"You crazy, man?" Draper bristled erect, glaring. "I wouldn't pay you a hundred dollars bonus to drive them to the Yukon."

"Then drive them yourself!"

MOUNTING, without a backward glance, Johnny left Draper there, fuming. Riding away, he passed near Flint McAlester. The ramrod didn't say anything, but his eyes slitted, promising revenge for the beating.

Johnny ignored him and rode on. After he got back to his ranch in Texas, he wouldn't see McAlester again. But after he had picked up his bedroll, he didn't head south, he headed east. Johnny grinned to himself. He wasn't going back to Texas—not just yet.

There had been too much exciting promise about Peggy Willoughby to leave her so abruptly. She might not be able to make him forget his disappointment over Dolly, but she could take away a lot of the sting. There was something so appealing about the slender nester girl. His pulse raced faster, just thinking of seeing her again.

He found the twin tracks of the wagon wheels. They arced in a wide circle, then lined straight ahead, pointing east. Under the warming rays of the new sun, blood-red over the horizon, Johnny followed the tracks.

When he spotted the wagon ahead, the bony team was already drooping in the harness, lagging. Slowly, he closed in on it. Still driving, the kid let the team make its own pace, seeming in no hurry to get home.

The rifle was crooked under his right arm. He couldn't have been much over twelve years old, and scrawny for his age. But when he picked up the rifle, he seemed years older. Here was a boy who had had to grow up too fast. Eyeing the girl on the seat beside, Johnny came up behind the wagon.

She glanced back casually, then jerked

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around, eyes lighting, full lips parted in a glad smile. But she sobered fast.

"Hey, cowboy, what's the matter?" she called. "They fire you?"

"Nope, I quit." Johnny grinned and shoved his hat far back. "They get up too early of a morning to suit my bones." He studied her. "Mind if I tag your wagon into town?"

"We don't go clear to town, but you can see it from our place." She glanced down at the three calves, now lying quietly on the jolting wagon bed. "Sure you can stay with us. You know you're welcome."

"Fine." Johnny let his horse lag a little, kept a comfortable distance behind the wagon. While he rode, he studied the girl.

She sat erect on the seat now, as if aware of his study. She didn't sit very high, and she was almost too thin. Even after the day and night on the trail, she made a pretty, feminine picture sitting there.

She wasn't nearly as beautiful as Dolly, he observed, nor could she ever hope to be. Dolly was one in a million, with every advantage to keep herself looking perfect. But—Johnny rubbed his whiskered chin thoughtfully. Already, it seemed, he *liked* Peggy Willoughby a lot more.

THEIR home was a cluster of ramshackle, weather-beaten buildings. They were surrounded by a few cultivated acres. The ground was planted in garden, the rows neat and well-kept. But the plants were sickly, lacking rain they would never get. Johnny shook his head. No wonder they were trying to start a few cows.

But he forced a smile when he rode in close to the corral where Spud Willoughby had driven the team.

"I'm in no hurry to get to town," Johnny said. "Why not let me help you get those orphans out of there?"

"Sure—we'll be happy for your help," Peggy said, jumping lightly to the ground. "I've got a place all ready for them."

Johnny met Spud Willoughby's timid gaze. "I forgot to thank you this morning," he told the kid. He glanced at the rifle. "You sure saved my bacon."

"You was helping us," the kid mumbled. "It wasn't nothing." He turned quickly to the team, almost hiding the pleased grin which lighted his face. When he turned back, his face had its usual sober set. "I've got to go to town. If you're going to rest up a couple hours till I get back, I'll take my rifle along. Otherwise, I'll leave it here with Sis."

"Yeah, I'll stay," Johnny told him. "I'm not in any hurry."

It pleased him that the boy would trust him so readily. There was a lot of maturity, a lot of manliness in the way Spud kept an eye on his sister. The kid had been forced into a grown man's role, Johnny thought, and from the way he handled the rifle, he was doing a good job of it.

Johnny carried the bound calves into the corral Peggy had readied. In the driver's seat again, Spud drove on to town. When the calves were frisking around the corral, Johnny turned to Peggy with a satisfied smile.

"That'll make a lot of beef, once it gets growed up. You know how to feed them?"

"I—I think so." Now that he was alone with her, she seemed more unsure of herself. "Wait, and I'll go get some milk."

Away in the distance, he spotted two milch cows grazing, and he guessed they had plenty of milk. She came back with two battered buckets, each half filled with milk.

"That's all the pails I've got," she said. "Guess one'll have to wait its turn." She glanced off at the grazing cows. "We've got too much milk and everyone has their own cow, so we can't sell it. That's why we were so anxious to get these calves."

"Yeah, I see." Taking one of the buckets, he climbed over the pole corral. Trapping one of the calves between his knees, he fed it two fingers and thrust its head into the milk.

After a few lunges to get away, the calf settled down and sucked the milk up between his fingers. Peggy watched close, alert and interested. Her dark eyes were soft, warm as she watched him. He grinned.

"See how it's done?"

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"Sure, let me try it," she said, and brought the other pail into the corral.

WHEN they had fed all three, they left the corral. They wandered around the farm, through the rows of garden, past the buildings. The sun rose high, grew hotter.

They didn't talk much. But the silence was a comfortable, understanding one. They wanted to know each other better, Johnny guessed, but neither wanted to hurry matters. Suddenly, Peggy glanced at him, then up at the sun.

"Say, I'll bet you haven't even had breakfast yet."

"So many things been happening this morning—no—I haven't," Johnny said, laughing, and he followed her toward the house. "Guess I'll have to settle for dinner now."

The furnishings were crudely simple, but everything was neat and orderly. Glancing around, the next thing Johnny noted with pleasure was that he could see no dirty dishes. Smiling, Johnny sat down on an old box.

While she prepared the meal, he watched every move she made. One thought kept nagging at him. Some way he had to find an excuse to stay here, to get to know her better, because her mere presence seemed able to drive the hurt of Dolly's leaving farther and farther from his mind.

They ate in a companionable silence, and he enjoyed every second of the meal. Several times he caught her looking at him, her gaze searching in a frank scrutiny.

"Tell me," she asked finally, "did you really quit, or did you get fired for helping me?"

"I could've stayed on." Johnny shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I've got a cattle ranch of my own down in Texas anyhow."

"Then why do you work for another man? Friend of yours?"

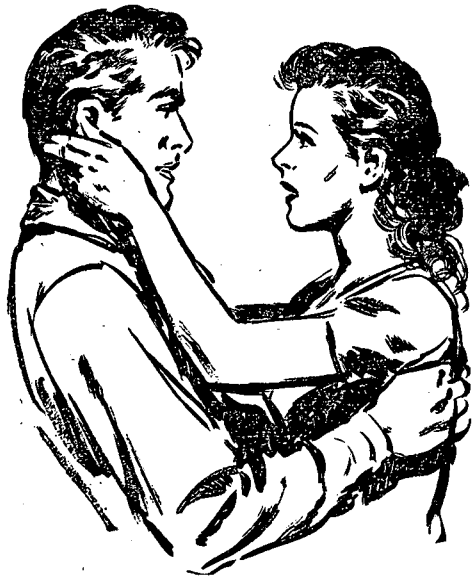
Johny grinned ruefully. "No, I'm afraid not. If he was, I wouldn't have quit him." He met her eyes in a level gaze. "Had girl trouble in Texas, and I wanted to get away for awhile."

"Oh." Her color deepened, and she stood up and started stacking the dishes. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be snoopy."

"It isn't as bad as it might sound," Johnny said quickly. "She just liked the looks of somebody else better, I guess."

An odd, waiting kind of silence lengthened in the room.

"She couldn't have been very smart,"



"I couldn't imagine anyone not liking your looks," said Peggy

Peggy said, in a very small voice. She sounded like she had to force the words past her lips.

"Would you tell me why you think she wasn't?" Johnny asked gently.

Peggy faced him, flushed and struggling to keep a quiver from her lips. She glanced away, but she stood her ground.

"I don't know," she said carefully. "It's just—I couldn't imagine anyone not liking your looks."

Slowly, Johnny stood up and moved closer to her. His heart beat in a steady pound under his shirt.

Without hesitation, he gathered her slender warmth, held her. Her cheek pressed firmly against his.

"It's lonely for you here, isn't it?" he said softly.

"I—I guess it is." At first tense in his

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arms, she relaxed. "Sometimes terribly so, it seems like."

HE WANTED to hold the moment forever, with his arms sheltering her. Hoofbeats sounded through the still noon air, faint at first but rapidly becoming a steady drum. It jerked them out of their pleasant moment, and Johnny whirled to the door.

"It's Spud!" she said, coming up close behind him. "Something's wrong, that's not his horse."

Perched grimly atop a big roan horse, he hurried in a dead gallop for the house. His bright blue eyes were wide, fearful.

"Borrowed a horse to come tell you, Johnny," he blurted. "That jigger—the one who held the gun on you—he's in Pine Junction, and he's madder'n seventeen hornets!"

"McAlester," Johnny snapped. "What the hell's he doing there?"

"Said the outlaw Sioux ambushed the crew and drove off the herd," Spud frowned. "He was cussing you for a double-dealing quitter and said he come back to get you." The lad wiped sweat from his forehead. "Now he's pouring liquor down, getting crazy drunk."

"Damn!" Tension tightened his middle, and Johnny raced for his horse. He was in the saddle, ready to spur away when Peggy got there. She frowned at him, her dark eyes questioning.

"Do you have to go?" Quick fear edged her voice. "If it's the way Spud said, there's nothing you can do."

For a long moment, tempted, Johnny hesitated. He didn't owe Draper anything, that was a cinch. But he thought of Limpy, and Winters and the rest of the crew.

In a way, he had run out on them. The least he could do would be to see if he could still help. He shook his head, forcing a smile for her sake.

"I'm sorry, Peggy, I just have to go," he said.

"Then don't go to town, if *he's* going to be there." Her dark eyes pleaded with him. "If you have to go, why not go right out to the herd?"

It was a way out. "I'll see," he said, and sent his horse running out of the yard.

But before he went a hundred yards, he knew he would have to face Flint McAlester. If the herd had been stampeded, as they would be during an attack, the crew might have made a running fight, might not be within miles of the herd. Flint McAlester would know, and he was the man to see. Johnny turned his horse in the direction of Pine Junction. Its huddled buildings stood out plainly, baking in the midday sun.

Cursing, he blamed himself for not staying with the crew, for not being on hand to help. But he thought it over again, and he guessed he was being foolish to blame himself. At the time, it had seemed like he was doing the right thing.

But Flint McAlester wouldn't see it that way. Urging his horse to a faster pace, Johnny wiped sweat from his hands to his levi legs. Even if McAlester couldn't blame him for not being there for the raid, the big ramrod would still want his revenge for other reasons.

The thought brought up another question. A puzzling one, and Johnny scowled. If the crew was in trouble, what was McAlester doing here?

It was past noon when he entered Pine Junction's single twisting street. There weren't over a dozen business houses, closely surrounded by the homes of the townspeople. Up the middle of the street, Johnny hurried his horse, keeping a sharp eye out on both sidewalks.

There were two saloons, and McAlester would be in one of them. Tying his horse at the nearest hitch-rack, Johnny stepped to the sidewalk, wondering which to try first.

WHILE he hesitated, a portly, middle-aged man with a star on his chest, sidled up the sidewalk toward him. Johnny waited.

The man seemed irritated by his presence there. A worried frown twisted his face. He covered the plank walk with jerky, nervous strides.

"I'm Sheriff Bilkins," he said, through tight lips. "I guess you're the one that wild bucko's looking for."

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Johnny nodded. "Where is he?"

The man jerked his head at the far side of the street. "The Elkhorn Saloon, over there. You might be better off if you go right back outa town."

"Sorry, can't."

"Then have your gun close to your hand," Bilkins warned. "I won't interfere, by damn. That man's loco!"

The words chilled him, but Johnny didn't, couldn't hesitate now. Quickly, he slipped across the street, toward the Elkhorn Saloon. From thirty feet away, he heard Flint McAlester's harsh voice cursing. Already he sounded husky from liquor.

Grasping his .45, Johnny hooked his thumb over the hammer, ready to pull and fire. Then he slipped through the door of the saloon.

Pounding the bar violently, McAlester's broad back was to him, and the big ramrod was cowing two other patrons with his loud talk. McAlester drank deep from a bottle, blew out his breath.

"He ran out on us, the damned traitor!" McAlester rasped angrily. "Lucky I was back, speeding up the drag. Wasn't there when those sneakin' sons hit. I still say"—his fist pounded the bar—"I would've been a fool to rush into that." McAlester towered over a scrawny lounger, who eyed him fearfully. "Ain't that right?"

The man licked his lips nervously. "Yeah, I reckon. No sense in getting killed like that."

"But that wasn't the reason I ran," McAlester said, his voice a furious purr. "I ran because I wanted to get the dirty double-dealin' son that ran out on us this morning." He drank again, deeply, from the bottle. "For the crew—all dead."

Suddenly, Johnny knew why the foreman was so crazy to get him. McAlester had run out on them to save his own hide. Now, desperately, he wanted a reason for doing it, to save his own self respect.

"Flint, you're a damned coward!" Johnny announced coldly.

McAlester stiffened, dropped the whisky bottle. It crashed on the floor. Seem-

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Coming up in the next issue

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ingly stunned for a moment, he didn't move.

Then abruptly, he threw himself sideways to the floor, his right hand clawing the Colt from his holster. Crouching, Johnny tipped his own gun.

McAlester's Colt crashed deafeningly in the closed room. Forcing an iron calm, Johnny leveled his own .45 carefully, let the hammer drop.

His gun recoiled jarringly in his hand, with the crash of it. The slug slammed into McAlester's middle, seemed to break the big ramrod in two. Clawing feebly at the pain low in his chest, he collapsed, shuddered once and never moved again.

CAUTIOUS heads poked out from behind the bar, stared at the motionless figure. Feeling a numbing sickness, Johnny turned and forced his feet back out through the door again.

He hadn't meant to kill McAlester, but he had. The ramrod had said the crew was dead, all dead. His trip had been worse than useless. All it had accomplished was to take another life.

The portly lawman moved over to him, peered close at his face. "You all right? Hey, boy, you look like you seen a ghost."

Johnny shrugged, shook the thoughts out of his head. "I shot him," he said quietly. "You can ask them in there—he pulled first."

"I don't question your word," the man said kindly. "I heard him talking. One of those things that has to be done, I guess. You all right now—can I help you?"

"Yeah," Johnny said bluntly. "Ride out with me and look for the crew he left. From what he said, they hit hell with the spurs on."

"Well, I don't know," the lawman said reluctantly. "That's a little out of my jurisdiction."

"Jurisdiction be damned," Johnny snapped. "Go get a horse."

"All right. I guess the trouble's over here for now."

They covered the miles in a dead gallop, not exchanging a word. They followed the herd's trail to the scene of the ambush.

Even from a distance, a deep sickness hit his belly, and it got worse the closer he went. He found Winters first. Anyhow he thought it was Winters; he couldn't tell for sure. From then on, Johnny didn't look too close, but he made a count to see if they were all there. They were.

The Indians hadn't let them rest where they had fallen. They had worked the crew over on the ground until there was no chance for any to escape with life left in them. Sheriff Bilkins faced him, white-skinned and breathing fast.

"This is a bad one for sure." He tried to smile encouragement and made a miserable job of it. "Know how this must hit you, knowing them. There ain't much you can do, so you might as well start back." The lawman swallowed hard. "I'll go back to town and get a wagon and some help."

Johnny nodded. "Yeah." That was all he could manage. Trying not to see the still figures lying on the ground, he headed his horse away from the scene of the massacre. His mind was so numb, it took a long time for him to hear the bawling in the brush.

Then, curiously, he went to investigate. A calf huddled in a clump of weeds. One lone shivering calf. All that was left of the herd. Johnny stared down at it. Impulsively, he dismounted and moved to it.

"Young 'un, you sure must think this's a mean world," he muttered. Picking it up, he carried it over and placed it on his saddle.

He mounted, working the calf to a comfortable bed in front of him.

The calf pressed closer to him, and he started forgetting the ugly scene behind him. The memory would fade with time, and already, looking to the future, he could see glorious promise.

By the time the calf grew up, Peggy Willoughby wouldn't be here to eat it. If it was up to him, she and her brother Spud would be eating beef in his own ranch house kitchen. Johnny forced a smile.

If the warm-eyed way she looked at him meant anything, Peggy would be willing.

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He wrapped her up in his long arms as if she were a Christmas package

NOT THE

SLIM WANTED TO PLAY the part of a wolf,

but he couldn't lose his sheepish feelings

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IT TOOK an ice cream soda to pry Stinky out of the matinee. Not that Slim would have minded seeing the Western another time, but he couldn't sit through *Flames of Desire* again, not for all the gunfights north of the Rio. Forking over four bits, he said to the kid, "I'll be at the Branding Iron—mind you come straight over there when you're done."

"Ain't you coming to the Sweet Shoppe?"

"No, I ain't coming to the Sweet Shoppe. You know I can't stand that guy that runs it."

"Aw, Bert Berry ain't ever there in the afternoon. There's a yaller-headed old lady waiting table."

"And, furthermore, you know women don't interest me."

"Me neither," Stinky assured him, "but she sure puts out a better soda than old Berry does."

The Branding Iron was not a cocktail lounge, like these looking-glass and chromium city bars, not by a mile of barbed wire. It was a saloon, a dirty, noisy man refuge where guys went to get drunk and forget women and lose their money at four-card hokey and swap lies. Poor Slim Driscoll had no women to forget and no money to lose. He'd quit drinking when he took his sister's orphaned baby to raise, and he was always on the receiving end of the tall stories, but, all the same, he preferred the saloon to that drugstore cowboy's new ice cream parlor.

". . . so I raised him a hundred," Ike Hawkey was laying it on to repay Slim for the beer he'd staked him to, "and what does the yeller-bellied cuss do then?"

Obediently, Slim opened his mouth to ask, when his question was stilled by a sudden hush falling so reverently that he could only conclude someone had dropped dead. Pushing his dusty black stetson far back on his rumpled blond head, he craned his long neck to see if it was someone he didn't like. What he saw jerked an involuntary blink to his eyes.

There in the doorway, slender white arms holding the swinging doors wide, was a lady, a young lady, an April-morning girl with shining chestnut hair and clear-sky eyes And Slim's heart in his lean chest stopped with a *ping!*

He could only suppose it was the shock of seeing a lady enter the rough saloon. Along the bar, loungers pushed back their stools to rise, mauling off their hats and howdying like a bunch of schoolboys. Stumbling over his own feet, old Pokey, the bartender, ran out from behind the counter.

"Evening, evening, Miss Annamae," he babbled. "I reckon you come for the table?"

"I do hate to bother you, Mr. Pokey," she sang, and her voice was April, too, a rustling breeze through the tall new meadow grass, "but we're all ready for it."

At the sound of her voice, Slim's heart got back on the job, on the double.

"Some of you leadheads grab a hold," blustered Pokey, and half a dozen big-footed idlers stampeded for the honor of carting out the big green poker table that had not, in twenty years, seen the light of the sun.

WHISTLE KIND

by Evelyn D. Rice

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"Mr. Berry will show you where to put it," she said gratefully, lingering in the doorway to thank Pokey.

RIGHT there Slim opened his mouth and put his big foot in it. All choked up like he was, with his fool heart jumping fences, he couldn't think clearly, but like a flash he remembered the movie, not the Western, of course; they did it different in the Western. "Flames of Desire" it was, where the poor but honest shoe clerk made the gorgeous society girl fall in love with him—just like that!

His lips made an "O," and from them issued a long, low wolf whistle.

Things didn't come out like in the picture. Turning as red as a tomato, the April-morning girl jumped like she had seen a worm on the same tomato. In a whirl of flowered skirts, she vanished, and then Pokey was coming at him with menacing tread.

"I oughta bust you one, Slim Driscoll," he rumbled.

Alarmed, Slim looked about him and harvested a barley sack full of scowls.

"Heck, all I done was whistle," he said, feeling like a balloon with a slow leak.

"Miss Annamae Merrill," stated Pokey, as if he was talking about a gold mine that just happened to belong to him, "ain't the whistle kind."

"Wh—what kind is she, then?"

"Dummy! She's the new schoolteacher!"

"What's a schoolteacher doing with a poker table? Is she setting up a game somewheres?" He knew better than that, but he couldn't think of anything else.

"Aw, *no,* you big baboon, she ain't setting up a game somewheres!" mimicked Pokey. "She's giving a *play.* She's done corralled a bunch of them teen-agers that's been a-hanging around the streets after dark and she's learning 'em a reg'lar stage play with curtains and plops and ever'thing."

"What in the name of Pete for?"

Pokey spread his arms in disgust. "What for? To keep 'em outa trouble, for one thing. To raise money to build 'em a clubhouse where they can go and drink pop and jitterbug—that's what for!"

Slim began to wish he'd done like the Western hero and shot a couple of rustlers for her.

"He oughta 'pologize to her," someone muttered indignantly.

"And that's just what he's gonna do," promised Pokey. "As of now, Slim Driscoll, you can consider yourself oxtrasized from the Brandin' Iron till you 'pologize to Miss Annamae." There was a general growl of approval.

The Branding Iron didn't mean a great deal to Slim, but Miss Annamae Merrill's good opinion was beginning to. Unfolding his six-foot-four from the bar stool, he vowed:

"By the great horned cow, if I got outa line I'll cut her outa the herd and 'pologize personal."

Courage ebbing, once out on the street, however, he realized that it is one thing to say you're going to tell a lady you're sorry, and quite another thing to do it. Especially with the ice cream cowboy, Bert Berry, around.

What he needed was an excuse to approach her; he couldn't just walk in. The sight, just then, of Stinky ambling toward him, rubbing his little round middle, gave Slim another flash, better than the last.

HE COLLARED his nephew and looked him hard in the eye. "See here, Stinky, how old are you?"

"Jiminey, Slim, I dunno!" replied the boy honestly. "Eight, I think."

"Why ain't you in school?"

"School? You nuts? School's for little kids."

"Ain't there a law says you gotta go to school?"

"Darned funny law, if there is."

"You can't even read and write," Slim accused him.

"I can so! They ain't a brand in the county I can't—"

"Brands! That settles it. You're going to school and learn something besides cows!" And he chivvied his squirming nephew down the street to the brick schoolhouse on the corner.

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Remembering, as they stood at the door, that it was sundown on Saturday, Slim frowned helplessly; but he heard voices within, and the knob turned in his hand, so he pushed on in, right into the dangedest set-to he had ever witnessed.

"Have you forgotten your sacred promise? Does my pure love mean nothing to you?" Maybelle Parks was bawling, right out in the middle of the floor for everyone to see, and she was throwing her skinny arms around fat Joey Moon, whose father ran the grocery store.

"Do not judge me in haste, my sweet," Joey thundered, pushing her away like she was an old cow about to lick his face. "Circumstances seal my lips and force me to the saddest duty of my life."

"Dishonored!" moaned Maybelle. "Betrayed!"

"Yes!" vindictively shrilled a little freckled filly that Slim thought must be one of Pokey's grandchildren. "Well you may say that, for this man is to be my husband ere another fortnight has faded into yesterday."

It was one too many for Slim. All he knew was that kids didn't bet that kind of money when he was in his teens. Scratching his head in embarrassed anxiety, he wondered why someone didn't stop them or anyway tell 'em to take their catfight elsewhere. He sighed with relief, then, to see the pretty schoolteacher, Miss Annamae Merrill, striding purposefully toward them.

"Kiss me," said Miss Annamae.

"Oh, sure. Kiss me," blubbered Maybelle. "One parting kiss, Jeffrey Valentine, is the price of your freedom."

Joey grabbed hold of Maybelle like he was setting a fence post and hammered a light smack into her stiff cheek.

"Oh, no!" cried Miss Annamae. "Kiss her like you meant it. Heavens, Joey, haven't you ever—well, maybe not. Like this, Joey." And Slim passed a shaking hand over his forehead as the lovely Annamae wrassled Joey to a standstill and planted a sizzler on his set lips. "You've got to live the play," explained Miss Annamae.

The play! Why, of course. In his relief, Slim sighed from his boots. Now he saw the poker table, too, with playing cards scattered over it, like in the movies when the cops break up a game. Self-consciously he looked around to see if anyone had detected his naiveté. Lolling around on desks, their eyes intent, were maybe a dozen big kids; and leaning against the wall with folded arms and a supercilious smile, was that drugstore cowboy, Bert Berry.

Joey had another shot at it, but it was plain the kid was rattled. Slim guessed he was out of his depth; Joey was about sixteen, and the other kids seemed to have him beat two or three years. In mute appeal, Miss Annamae cast her eyes toward Bert Berry.

SLIM never figured out what got into him, but all of a sudden he knew two things; that he had the dangedest notion to help the pretty teacher out, and that Bert Berry was even now indolently moving to do the same thing. Releasing the enchanted Stinky, Slim strode past him, up before all those kids, and said:

"This here's what the teacher means, Joey; now, get this." And he grabbed Miss Annamae. She gave one frightened little squawk, but Slim was dead-gone on helping her. He wrapped her up in his long arms like a Christmas package, and he landed on her lips like she was a waterhole and him three days gone on the desert.

"That's what Miss Annamae's driving at, Joey. Get some soup in it, boy," he said. "Howdy, ma'am," he added, turning her loose. She was very white around the mouth and she rubbed the back of her neck in a dazed sort of way.

"All right," shouted Joey furiously, for snickers could be heard. "So that was easy. Only just lessee you kiss Maybelle thataway!"

Maybelle scootered around behind the teacher.

"Joey's the one's gotta kiss me," she yelped. "Make Joey kiss me like that, Miss Merrill!"

"That's enough!" snapped Miss Annamae, and her voice carried authority like the click of a .44. "The rehearsal is dis-

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missed until tomorrow night. Out, all of you!"

Slim didn't quite catch all that was said to him in the next few minutes, after the giggling kids had filed out, leaving him and Stinky alone with the odiously grinning Bert Berry and the girl in whom April sunshine had turned to thunder and lightning, but he did get the general drift. He judged it wasn't the time to bring up the whistle.

"Golly," he spluttered, first time she stopped for breath, "I was just trying to help you with the play."

"And what," she inquired icily, "makes you think you know the first thing about putting on a play?"

Casting about desperately for a straw to cling to, all Slim could see was Bert Berry's hateful grin, and it seemed to him that any means would justify wiping off that grin. Defiantly, he said, "I oughta know. I been in plenty of them. Don't s'pose you ever seen a western movie?"

Frightened at the enormity of the lie he felt coming on, Slim would have stopped right there, except that he noticed Berry's grin fading and he heard Miss Annamae saying, "Certainly I've seen Westerns," with just the little speck of back-down it took.

"Then maybe you remember Sixgun Driscoll that played in a lot of 'em here five, six years ago?"

She looked a question at Berry, who was looking some questions of his own.

"I don't," said Berry positively.

"Well—the name seems familiar," she said hesitantly.

"Yes. Well, it should." Slim gave an old-time sheriff jerk to his dusty black stetson and regarded Berry with quiet triumph. "Just plain old Slim Driscoll to my neighbors now that I've quit the game and gone to ranching," he said with dignity. "But that's enough said about me. What I come here for, in the first place, was to start my nephew, Stinky, in to school."

FROM that point on, the interview went smooth as a hog in the mud. Under his proper name—dredged up from the long dead past—of Sinclair Smith, Stinky was entered on the rolls, and Slim prepared to go.

"Until tomorrow night," pleaded Annamae. "I certainly didn't know who you were, Mr. Driscoll, believe me. You—you will come and watch us again, won't you, and help? I don't mean," she added hurriedly, "quite so—so forcefully as tonight; but a suggestion here and there, perhaps."

Alarmed at the prospect of getting in deeper, Slim tried to beg off, but she wouldn't hear of it and she wouldn't let him go until he promised to return.

"Odd," she mused at the door, "that the young people never mentioned having a famous movie star among them."

"They don't know it," said Slim miserably. "Nobody much 'round here knows. Just . . . plain old Slim Driscoll now." He edged out the door, and Bert Berry followed on his little cat feet.

"What studio did you say you made pictures for?" asked Berry casually.

Slim lowered his chin to look hard at Berry. "I didn't say."

In heavy silence, he and Stinky walked to their horses, patiently waiting behind Mullen's feed store. In the saddle, Slim dealt his forehead a stinging slap, moaning:

"Lordy! Why didn't somebody shoot me before I done that?"

Stinky, vaulting onto his own little buckskin, spared him a scowl. "Awright, Sixgun Driscoll," he snarled. "You sure give me a nice send-off to school."

Given his choice, Slim would have slapped a hungry she-grizzly, with one hand tied behind him, rather than go back the next night, but Stinky made it plain that, if he had to suffer through school, his uncle would do a little suffering himself.

"But I'm gonna make a clean breast of the whole thing," Slim promised the boy as they rode into town.

Stinky grunted.

"Miss Annamae," began Slim the second they walked in, "I'd like to—"

"Oh, thank heaven you're here, Mr. Driscoll! Everything's going wrong tonight. Nobody remembered the playing cards, and Maybelle left her part at home—"

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When he got back from all the errands, Bert Berry was there, and he stuck to the pretty schoolteacher like a cockleburr to a cat's back all evening; and no matter what, Slim wasn't about to confess his sins before that little twerp. And after the rehearsal, Berry announced his intention of taking the teacher to the Sweet Shoppe for a soda. Slim had just one chance to get a word in edgeways, in private, as they were leaving.

"Miss Annamae, I've gotta tell you something. I'm the biggest, dumbest liar in—"

"Hardly that, Mr. Driscoll," she caroled, patting his arm fondly. "Don't you know better than to tell a girl your faults? She'll find them out quick enough. Oh, I've got to run. Mr. Berry's waiting. Thanks so much for coming, Mr. Driscoll. You don't know what a comfort it is to have you here."

And she flurried off after Berry. The golden moment had vanished. In the days that followed, he never got a chance to talk to her alone. She was busy, of course, with school—which the reluctant Stinky attended—in the daytimes, and rehearsals in the evenings. Berry stuck by her side relentlessly.

EVERY morning Slim vowed to forget the whole thing and not go back; and every evening found him and Stinky riding to town. For, by this time, he was living in a dream world entirely populated by one April-morning girl with blue eyes and shining chestnut hair. He'd just as well have made up his mind to stop eating as to stop seeing her, even if he had to ride to her on a horse with a run brand.

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The posters had been up since Sunday, and now that it lacked thirty minutes of the zero hour, Slim could look at this one tacked to Mullen's feed store without shuddering too much. In a way, he was glad that it would soon be over; Annamae so blindly trusting him and so dang-busted busy every minute that he couldn't get a word in, kids getting last minute hysterics, Bert Berry with his inside track with Annamae and his eternal fool questions about Slim's movie career, Slim himself sweating under the sword of guilt. . . .

For once, Annamae wanted to see him alone. When he set foot, Stinky at his heels, in the packed hall, he saw her beckoning frantically from the curtained-off dressing rooms at the back.

She was almost in tears. "Joey's sick."

"He is?"

"Bert just told me. He can't be in the play."

Quick Getaway

By Limerick Luke

A dudeen whose pet name was Gert
With a bashful cowpoke tried to flirt,
But he took out so fast,
What she saw of him last
Was the wind-fluttered tail of his shirt!

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"Stomach upset," said Berry pleasantly, parting the curtains to slide in. "Any suggestions, Sixgun?"

"All those people," moaned Annamae. "We'll have to give them their money back, and they'll never turn out like this again, and after the kids have worked so hard!"

"Lordy! Can't you ring someone in on Joey's part?"

Berry was smiling smoothly, and Annamae was looking at him with the dawn of hope in her eyes.

"A good idea," murmured Berry. "The great movie star."

"Oh, Mr. Driscoll—could you—?"

In mortal agony, Slim cried, "Do you mean for me to take Joey's part, go out there in front of all them people and—"

"Surely," said Berry easily, "a man like the great Sixgun Driscoll could bluff it through?"

"Oh, please, Slim—Mr. Driscoll! You've been at all the rehearsals for more than a week. You could ad lib where you had to. You know the story—and I'd be right here to prompt you."

"Excuse *me*" said Slim fervently.

"For me!" cried Annamae. "Please?"

"Our friend is suffering from a touch of temperament," said Berry. "You run along, Annamae, let me put it up to him."

She made a small gesture of final appeal and defeat, and, suddenly burying her face in her hands, ran out.

Triumphantly, Berry lit a cigarette and squinted at Slim through the curling smoke. "Showdown, Sixgun," he sneered. "The great movie star—who's never been fifty miles from this town in his life! Care to keep it up any longer?"

Slim said nothing; the very thought of facing that audience turned his bones to cooked noodles.

"I thought you'd run when your hand was called. Look, fourflusher. You can do like Annamae wants you to, go out in front of all those people and turn her show into the damnedest joke this town ever had. Or you can walk right out that back door and not come back. I know the part, been studying it all day, in fact. And I'll give you a break; get out and stay out, and I won't tell Annamae you're bogus. Either way, Mr. Slim Driscoll, you lose!"

Slim drew one deep breath.

He wanted, more than anything else in the world, to smack his brawny brown fist into the sneering, handsome face of Bert Berry; but a terrible sense of futility robbed him of the strength. Small comfort to scratch a mosquito bite when you're drowning!

BUT there was one thing he could do to help Annamae just the least little bit. From the dressing room he leaped upon the curtained stage and savagely he pulled the curtains apart to step out before the packed house. A blurred sea of faces bobbed before him in the expectant hush that fell. Slim knew stage fright, then, and he launched his speech before he should turn and run.

"Folks!" he bellowed, too loud; but at least they heard him clear to the door, as Annamae had drilled into her players—and behind him, too, in the dressing rooms and in the wings. "I just got a few words to say and I'll make it short and sweet and then I'll get out of here and let the show go on. You all know me, I'm Slim Driscoll, got a little spread out on Cow Crick. Never been out of this county in my life, and you all know it. Well, a while back I done some talking when I shoulda been listening. I told a lady I was a big movie star from Hollywood."

A gasp of delighted astonishment rose from the sea.

"Then I didn't have the guts," declared Slim, raising his hand for silence, "to tell her the truth and I let her go on thinking it.

"Tonight you all come here and paid good money to see a show that lady's putting on to raise money for a clubhouse for the kids. We've just heard that the star performer, Joey Moon, is sick and can't be here."

That brought another gasp. Slim saw a woman—he thought it looked like Joey's mother—rise uncertainly and sit down again, and he was conscious of a scuffle and of voices on the curtained stage behind him.

"Now this lady, thinking I was some-

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thing I ain't, asked me to take his part. I can't do it for the good reason that I couldn't act good enough to fool a day-old calf. But there is a guy here that can do it. For the sake of Miss Annamae Merrill and all these kids that worked doggone hard to get this show together, I'm asking you to give him a good hand.

"Bert Berry is gonna take Joey's part."

"Booo!" yelled someone out front, and then the whole crowd was booing. A man rose, and Slim saw him to be old Ike Hawkey among his large brood.

"Looka here, Slim Driscoll," shouted Ike, "I didn't pay five bucks out so's me and the old lady and these blasted kids of mine could look at Bert Berry." More boos. "If we gotta watch somebody make a blamed jackass of hisself, we'd ruther it was somebody we liked." Ike looked around him. "I nominate Slim Driscoll to take Joey's part."

"Second the nomination," hollered someone. "You can do it, Slim," yelled another. Then they were all chanting his name, and Slim, realizing that he had, once and for all, spoken his piece in public, and that he was still alive, shouted:

"All right, by golly! I'll do it. Them as wants to leave now can get their money back; them as wants to see the show can have their money back afterwards, and I'll make it up outa my own pocket so the kids can still have their clubhouse."

KNOWING that he would inevitably make hamburger out of the show, Slim turned with a heavy heart, amid the wild clapping, and almost fell over a small boy who stood behind him. . . .

"You didn't have to go to all that trouble," hissed Stinky worriedly. "Joey's here."

Thunderstruck, Slim followed Stinky behind the curtain, where, a little pale but undeniably present, Joey stood between a redfaced, spluttering Berry, and a pale, distraught Annamae.

"I had a hunch," said Stinky, "and I run down to the Sweet Shoppe. There set Joey with the *biggest* soda I ever see in my whole life. He told me Mr. Berry give him ten bucks and all he could eat to stay away tonight."

There are times when you just have to scratch, drown or no drown. With one long stride, Slim crossed the stage, and into a single exploding drive of his knotted fist he packed all his outrage at a man who would endanger Annamae's hard work for his own selfish ends. Bert Berry crumpled to the floor, cold.

The house rang with cheers and handclaps. Swinging his head in alarm, Slim saw that Stinky was only now letting drop the curtain he had considerately lifted so that the audience could witness the scene. No one, probably, beyond the first row knew what it was about, but apparently they were all of one mind about Bert Berry.

"I'll be at the horses," said Slim to Stinky and, without a look at Annamae, he headed for the backdoor.

IF THE Branding Iron hadn't been shut up tight on account of everyone being at the play, Slim would assuredly have tied one on that night. Instead, he dragged his broken-hearted body around behind Mullen's feed store, where the horses were, and slumped himself wearily on the loading platform for a bitter, reflective cigarette.

Many cigarettes later, he heard a step at the corner of the feed store. So the show was over, and Stinky was coming. Sighing, he started to get up.

But it wasn't Stinky. Coming toward him through the dark and the moonlight, was Annamae.

Settling back, Slim said glumly, "Go ahead and say it."

"I will," she replied evenly. "I've quite a bit to say. First, thank you."

"What for?"

"They insisted on paying extra for the fight. We took in almost a hundred dollars in donations for that alone. The show went splendidly. Joey was sick once, between acts, fortunately. That clears *that* up. Now, I want to know what you ran out on me for."

"I lied to you," he mumbled. "I didn't figure you'd want me around underfoot after you found that out."

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"Found it out? Look, Slim Driscoll, you big, dumb cowpoke: I've seen every Western that was ever made, almost. Of course I knew you were lying. I thought at first you were all hot air, and I was going to fix you plenty; and then the next night, when you tried to tell me, I—well, anyway, I let you think you were fooling me—I sort of lied, too, didn't I?" Slim noticed with surprise that her voice was rapidly growing softer and warmer.

"I'm the biggest fool that was ever born," marveled Slim, wondering how you were supposed to take a girl like that. "Starting with the day I whistled at you in the Branding Iron, and old Pokey had to tell me some girls aren't the whistle kind."

"Foodley-doo," she said comfortably, standing there by him in the dark, looking down at him, laughing a little. "All girls are the whistle kind . . . sometimes."

Turning on her heel, she walked away. At the corner she paused and looked back, and the moonlight touched her shining hair, showing him her red lips made up into an "O," as she whistled: a long, low wolf whistle.

Slim got up then, not hastily, but with purpose. If Miss Annamae gave out with wolf whistles . . . she'd just have to figure on a wolf answering.

Sixgun Slim Driscoll, never of Hollywood, braced himself to play a brand new part.

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She buried her face in her hands and began to cry

PUMP HANDLE PREMISE

By Ben Frank

THERE is an old saying that you can't tell how deep a well is by the handle on the pump. But it is a known fact that a somewhat befuddled young man like Thomas Jefferson Hopkins, fondly known as Strawhead, can live to the ripe old age of twenty-four with no more on his mind than eating, sleeping, coon hunting and going to the mountains in August to fish for trout. And a pretty girl like Ella Ewald can grow up to be nineteen or twenty without ever meeting a young man who gives her a real heart flutter, or—

But to get back to this pump handle business. . . .

On a hot morning in early August, Strawhead Hopkins crawled out of bed, rubbed the sleep from his eyes with big bony fists, stumbled to the nearest window and gazed blurriedly upon the shimmering landscape. He was a tall, wide-shouldered young man with faded brown hair, over-

STRAWHEAD THOUGHT he was fishing for trout . . . not trouble!

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sized ears and a long slightly sun-peeled nose, whose doting uncle had left him three hundred acres of land blessed with a winding stream known as Never-dry Creek.

What Strawhead saw through the window pleased him mightily. Five great ricks of baled hay harvested from the lush meadows along the creek.

A happy smile touched his big mouth. Now that his work for the year was finished, there was no reason in the wide world why he couldn't spend from now until cold weather in the coolness of the mountains to the west, catching trout in the many snow-fed streams. A dreamy expression filling his innocent blue eyes, he climbed into his clothes and ambled into the kitchen for breakfast.

An old whiskery bow-legged and sawed-off ex-cowpuncher by the name of Fireball Bailey was doing the cooking. He took one look at Strawhead and knew the worst.

"So you're about to go fishin' for the rest of the summer," he observed.

"Heading for the mountains as soon as I can get packed," Strawhead said happily.

"What about all that there baled hay?"

Strawhead slid four fried eggs onto his plate. "Somebody comes along and wants to buy it, let him have it."

"Cash as usual?"

"You bet," Strawhead said firmly.

Not that he wasn't a trusting young man. He simply liked to close his annual hay business with cash so he wouldn't have anything to worry about until next year's crop came along.

THREE days later, Strawhead found himself riding his paint along a lonely mountain stream, looking for a spot that would serve both as a sutiable camp and a source of fat trout. But it had been an extremely dry year on the mountain slopes, and although the snow-fed stream ran briskly, the brown grass offered scant nourishment for his paint, and the dried-up pines held little in the way of shade and shelter.

A scowl of disappointment settled on his bony face. It had never occurred to him that this visit to the mountains might be different from the previous ones. Also, hunger pangs gnawed at his innards.

"Maybe I should of stayed to home," he muttered dismally.

Then rounding a tumble of boulders, he saw a towering blue spruce growing with its roots in the stream. The tree was green and heavily foliaged and cast a cool and inviting shadow upon a strip of grassy soil. Losing his scowl, Strawhead rode into the shade. And sitting right there at the foot of the tree was a neat wicker basket covered with a clean white cloth!

"Well, well!" he said softly and slid to the ground.

He lifted the cloth and beheld a platter of crusty-brown fried chicken, numerous bread and butter sandwiches and a large slice of blueberry pie.

"Always was lucky," he said to himself and set to work on a chicken leg.

After eating everything in sight, he rolled a smoke, lit it and puffed in contentment. Never occurred to him that he had actually stolen somebody's dinner. The smoke finished, he began to unpack his gear.

"Hey!" a voice called. "What goes on here?"

Strawhead spun around. A tall, willowy girl had stepped from behind a huge granite boulder and was approaching at a fast pace. She wore a thin summer dress that swirled about her slim legs in a pleasing manner. The sun tangled gaily with her copper-colored hair, and the blue of the clear sky had in some mysterious way drifted down into her round, wide-set eyes.

To save his life, Strawhead couldn't locate his voice.

Suddenly looking suspicious, the girl stepped up to the basket and whisked away the cloth. Instantly her eyes blazed up at him.

"It seems a girl can't set down a basket of food and turn her back without some old bum coming along and—"

She took a second and closer look at Strawhead and saw that he didn't exactly qualify as an old bum. Also, he seemed completely stunned by her appearance. He was big and strong and not bad looking, if

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you liked them brown and rugged. Which, she instantly decided, was the way she liked them.

"I—aw—er—" Strawhead said, breaking the breathless silence.

Suddenly she was angry again. Or, at least, pretending to be, even if her heart was beating like an Indian war drum.

"Here was this baby bluejay lying in the path," she said in a slightly unsteady voice. "I picked him up and went to look for his nest. And what do I find when I come back? An empty picnic basket!"

AS GUILTY as he was, Strawhead couldn't take his eyes off her. Her cheeks were a soft pink, and the breeze tumbled her bright hair about her slender shoulders and pressed the thin dress tightly against the curves of her young body. Well, Strawhead had no more idea than nothing as to who or what she was. And what's more he didn't care. All he knew was that he had fallen for her like a wagonload of buckshot.

He tugged his fish fly decked hat off his faded hair with trembling hands and drew a long quivering breath.

"I'm Thomas Jefferson Hopkins," he said hoarsely. "At your service, ma'am."

"Well," she said, trying to sound snappish about it. "I'm Ella Ewald and I—well, I've come on foot three miles with papa's dinner, and when he finds out you've eaten it, he'll break your—"

"Ella!" a deep voice boomed. "Where'n thunder are you? When a man works all mornin,' fixin' fence, he don't like to wait all afternoon for his dinner."

A red-faced, salty-haired old gent stepped from among a growth of pines and strode forward. He reminded Strawhead of a cross between a grizzly bear and a buzzsaw.

"Doggone it, girl, I'm hungry enough to chaw the bark off—oh, we got company?"

"Papa," Ella said nervously, "meet Mr. Thomas Jefferson Hopkins."

"Glad to know you, young feller," the oldster said heartily, shaking Strawhead's limp hand. "You a cattle buyer, or—"

"He," Ella interrupted faintly, "has just eaten your dinner."

Ewald liked to swallowed his teeth. "You mean you fed him my—"

"He found it," Ella said, "and—well, he was starving and—"

"It's this a-way—" Strawhead began helpfully.

"Fried chicken and blueberry pie," Ella said before she thought.

That did it. The old man began to stamp his big feet and snort and flap his arms like a caged eagle.

"What am I gonna eat?" he yelled, making a grab for Strawhead's throat.

Ella stepped in between them. She didn't know anything about this sorry-faced young man, but she did know that everytime she looked at him, she felt slightly dizzy.

"Now, Papa," she said soothingly, "don't get excited."

"If it's food you want, Mr. Ewald," Strawhead piped up, "you got nothing to worry about. Give me a few minutes, and I'll have you a trout dinner that'll—"

"Trout!" old man Ewald yelled, suddenly looking happy. "Man, I ain't had a good mess of trout in four years!"

Still somewhat dazed by his sudden romantic awakening, Strawhead began to assemble his flyrod.

The old man's face fell. "You mean you got to catch 'em first?"

"Won't take but a minute," Strawhead declared blandly.

"He's an expert fisherman, Papa," Ella said hopefully.

EWALD sat down in the shade and didn't say a word for the next twenty minutes, while Strawhead valiantly whipped the stream with no results. Then his patience wore thin and busted wide open.

"Come on, Ella, let's go home!" he yelled, leaping to his feet. "A man would starve to death, waiting for this saddle-bum to hook a fish!"

Mumbling cusswords under his breath, he stamped off along the stream.

Ella cast a sad and hopeless glance at Strawhead, who looked beaten and helpless and ready to go shoot himself. She gave him a wan smile that likely meant "Fare-

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well, my prince charming" and followed her pa.

Poor Strawhead watched her until she disappeared. Then he flung down his pole and did some cussing of his own.

"Also," he added mournfully, "if I hadn't eaten that old buzzard's dinner, things might have worked out different!"

He didn't sleep hardly at all that night for thinking about Ella. The next morning he rode to Montville, the nearest town, and learned that the Ewalds owned the Rocking E ranch and that they had a neighbor, known as Big-wheel Whalley, who was stuck on Ella.

Ignoring the fact that this Big-wheel hombre wasn't to be taken lightly, Strawhead made himself look as presentable as possible and went calling on Ella that evening. Luck had been with him in the afternoon, so he was able to take three fat trout as a peace offering to her old man.

Ella answered his knock. Seeing him, she felt a great flutter of butterflies within and blushed charmingly. Strawhead almost fainted. She was twice as pretty as he'd remembered her.

"Hello, Tommy," she said warmly.

Suddenly she was scared. Her pa had expressed in no uncertain terms his opinion of wandering young men who ate other folks' dinners. But then she saw the three lovely fish, and her spirits lifted.

"Won't you come in?" she invited giving Strawhead a smile.

He stumbled blindly after her into the front room.

"Papa," she called, "Mr. Hopkins is here to see you."

"That maverick!" the old man yelled, rushing into the room like a baited bull through a barn door. "You ain't fooling me none!" he said, shaking a fist at Strawhead. "You've come to see Ella, and I—"

His voice trailed off, for he had spotted the trout dangling from Strawhead's trembling hand.

"He brought them to you," Ella said gently.

The old man cooled off some pronto and smiled half-way friendly. He allowed they were mighty pretty trout and invited his visitor to sit down and take a load off his feet.

"I'll have them fish for breakfast," he said.

Strawhead sat down and looked at Ella. Ella looked at Strawhead.

The old man didn't miss a thing. The dazed expression in the young man's eyes. The roses in Ella's cheeks. And suddenly he didn't like the setup no two ways from Sunday.

IN THE first place, Thomas Jefferson Hopkins had made a mighty sour impression on him from the start. In the second place he didn't go for the idea of his only daughter losing her head over a strange young man who, like as not, was nothing more than a no-good saddle bum. Which was exactly what Strawhead looked like in his old fishing duds. In the third place—but the old man didn't exactly like to think of the third reason why he didn't want Ella taking up with this long hungry coyote.

He cleared his throat and said coldly, "Well, young man, what's your business in this part of the country?"

That question kind of threw Strawhead for a loss. But he wasn't the kind to evade an honest truth.

"Fishing for trout," he replied.

Old Ewald scowled. Nothing he himself liked better than a mess of mountain trout. But he didn't figure the fishing business would support his daughter.

"Where's your home?" he asked gruffly.

"East about fifty miles," Strawhead answered.

"What do you do at home?"

What did he do? Strawhead squirmed uneasily. The truth is, he didn't do much of anything. Just let his grass grow along the creek and then put it up for hay. No cattle, no nothing. Just worked about one week out of the year. He suddenly felt downright ashamed of himself.

"It don't take much for me to get along on," he murmured, gazing sheepishly down at his big feet. "So I don't do much of anything most of the time."

That was exactly what the old man was

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afraid of. Right off he figured this was as good a time as any to bust up any romantic notions this no-account Romeo and Ella might have.

"I believe everybody what's worth his salt has got to have a good steady job," he said pointedly.

Strawhead hung his head in shame.

"Fact is," Ewald went on in a loud voice, "I won't stand for nobody hanging around the Rocking E who don't have a job."

"Why should I go hunting buffalo for breakfast? I prefer ham and eggs!"

"You don't need another hand, do you?" Strawhead asked hopefully.

"No, I don't!"

Strawhead sighed unhappily.

"What's more," Ewald continued firmly, "Ella wouldn't take a second look at no gent who just loafs around and fishes. Would you, Ella?"

"No," Ella said in a faltering voice.

"Thanks for the fish," Ewald said. "I guess that about evens the score. Your fish for my dinner you ate."

The next thing Strawhead knew, he was on the outside of the house in the cold mountain darkness with the front door shut and locked in his face. Feeling like a spanked kid, he climbed aboard his paint and headed back toward his fishing camp.

Riding along, he got to thinking about himself. He'd never had a steady job in his life. Just loafed around the hay farm, helping his old uncle one week out of fifty-two until the old fellow cashed in his chips. Then hiring Fireball Bailey to do the odd jobs, like cooking and looking after the horses and machinery, and still working only about eight or ten days a year. Any way he looked at it, he was a plumb no-good jerk. Wasting his time, fishing in summer and coon hunting in winter. That night he didn't sleep any better than he had slept the night before.

WHEN morning came Strawhead Hopkins knew what he had to do. He had to get a steady job and prove to the Ewalds that he was some good for something. So he broke camp, tied his gear behind the saddle and headed once again for Montville. If he'd known what lay ahead of him there, he likely would have gone elsewhere. But you can't tell a thing by the handle on the pump.

He arrived in Montville about noon and rode straight to the horse tank that stood in the courthouse yard. A big, rawboned, black-headed jasper was watering his horse there, but Strawhead paid him no mind. He slid to the ground and slipped the bit out of the paint's mouth.

"Let's don't crowd in, stranger," the big gent said.

Strawhead looked him over coldly and didn't exactly like what he saw. "Guess there's room for my horse to drink," he said.

The gent's big jaw hardened. "Maybe you don't know who I am?"

Strawhead didn't know. Or care. The truth is, he was in a pretty nasty mood after two sleepless nights. He glared back at this uncouth cuss and didn't bother to say yes or no.

"Stand back!" the gent said, giving Strawhead a flat-handed shove.

A great wrath leaped into Thomas Jefferson Hopkins' long, lean body.

"If you want to be hoggish about this water," he said, "I'll be glad to help you!"

The next thing the black-headed man

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knew, he had been flung into the horse tank. He came up sputtering, and Strawhead put a big hand on the man's ugly dome and shoved him under again.

This process he repeated until the unpolite gent was about two-thirds drowned. Then he hauled him from the tank, helped him mount his horse and suggested he leave town pronto. The water-logged hombre obeyed without offering any arguments, leaving a wet trail behind him. After this, Strawhead pumped the tank full of fresh water and let his paint drink.

A fat man came waddling from the courthouse. His eyes stuck out like doorhandles, and a clammy sweat covered his beefy red face.

"Son," he wheezed, "I don't know who you are, but I reckon you ain't afraid of the devil himself. That gent wasn't nobody but Big Wheel Whalley!"

That rang a bell in Strawhead's mind. Big Wheel was the man who was sweet on Ella, he recalled; and now he wished vaguely that he'd gone ahead and drowned the skunk. But he took a second look at the fat man and was glad he hadn't, for the fat man wore a sheriff's star on his broad shirt front and likely wouldn't appreciate a murder on the courthouse lawn.

The over-stuffed sheriff held out a friendly hand. "Folks call me Tiny Tank."

Strawhead introduced himself.

"I'm in the market for a deputy," the sheriff said. "Any man who can man-handle Big Wheel Whalley can handle this job. What do you say, Hopkins?"

"If it's a steady job, I'll take it."

It was a steady job all right. But what he didn't know was Tiny Tank's reason for wanting to hire a deputy.

The next day, the sheriff told his new man he was going on a month's vacation.

"Never's no trouble here, son," Tiny Tank lied. "All you have to do is kind of keep my chair warm while I'm away."

HE SHOOK hands with Strawhead and departed for a distant mountain town to look after a sick cousin, or so he said. But Tiny Tank, if you must know, was neither a truthful man nor a brave one. A certain unsavory character by the name of Scatter-gun Grogan happened to be on his way back to his native town of Montville after a stretch in prison for mayhem, and the sheriff didn't want no run-in with a gent like Scatter-gun Grogan. He'd tried to hire a deputy from the ranks of Montville's native sons, but no one would touch the job with a ten-foot pole. Therefore, Tiny Tank was happy indeed to find a two-fisted stranger who jumped at a chance to become deputy. In a month or so, the sheriff reasoned, the outlaw would likely commit some crime that would get him hung or run out of the country. Then he could return from his vacation with nothing to worry about.

Once Strawhead got himself settled into this deputy job, he bought some new clothes and a string tie. He slicked up his bony face, parted his faded hair down the middle and rode to the Rocking E. He rode with a heart made light by the knowledge that at last he was a working man who could woo Ella Ewald with a clear conscience. Never occurred to him that Big Wheel Whalley would get in a few good licks.

Again Ella met him at the door; and again Thomas Jefferson Hopkins liked to fainted, she was that pretty.

Ella had heard about his being made deputy, but she was nobody's fool. The pressure had been turned on, and she knew the score.

"Hello, Tommy," she said miserably.

"I brought your pa another mess of trout," Strawhead said hopefully.

"That's nice," she said, smiling bravely.

"Gee, Ella," he whispered, "you're pretty!"

"Oh, Tommy!" she sighed.

He saw a tear squeeze out of the corner of each of her blue eyes. The next thing he knew, he'd dropped the fish and had her in his arms.

"You know," he said huskily, "I got a steady job now, and—well, we could get married and—"

But that was as far as he got, for she pushed him away, buried her face in her hands and began to cry.

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"I can't marry you—not if you have a thousand steady jobs." she sobbed.

BETWEEN sniffles he learned how it was. The drouth had burned the grazing lands to a crisp and left her father with a great herd of starving cattle. If he had to sell now with the price of thin stuff all shot to thunder, he would be ruined. But if he could buy feed, get a little meat on his cattle—well, he could manage to hold on to the Rocking E.

"It's that Big Wheel Whalley," she said. "He's the only one around who's got any extra feed. But he won't sell it to Papa unless—"

"Unless you marry him?"

She nodded miserably. "Papa doesn't want me to marry someone I don't love, but—"

Suddenly Strawhead began to laugh.

Ella stared at him, then began to grow angry.

"It's not funny!" she cried. "It's awful!"

"I got tons of hay," Strawhead told her. "I own a hay farm. Fact is, all me and Fireball do is cut hay, bale it and—"

"Well, why didn't you say so before?" Ella cut in.

"Didn't suppose it made any difference," Strawhead said. "I figured if your pa knew I did all my year's work in a week or two, he'd think that much the worse of me."

"Oh, Tommy!" she said, and grabbed him and hugged him tight. "Wait till we tell papa! Won't he be surprised!"

Surprised was putting it mildly. The old man liked to dropped his teeth when he learned that Strawhead owned a hay farm. Also, Pa Ewald had never had much use for Big Wheel Whalley and thought less of him now since he'd been putting on the pressure to marry Ella. Yes, sir, Thomas Jefferson Hopkins looked mighty good to the old man at the moment. He liked to unjointed Strawhead's shoulder the way he shook his hand.

"I figure it would be quite a trick to move all that hay up here into this mountain country," Strawhead said presently after things had calmed down. "So you round up your cattle and drive 'em down to my farm. Plenty of water, there, too."

"Son," the old man said, "it's a deal."

"I'll go with you and the cattle if I can get hold of Sheriff Tank so's I can resign being deputy," Strawhead said. "But if I can't resign in time, you and your crew'll have to go alone, and I'll send a letter with you to Fireball Bailey."

"Anything you say," old Ewald agreed quickly still pumping Strawhead's hand.

Two days later, Ewald and his boys were on their way with the thin Rocking E steers.

Now, anybody would think that from this point on that everything would be fine and dandy with Strawhead and Ella. But you never can tell—

To begin with, Strawhead was unable to contact Sheriff Tiny Tank. Then the day the cattle drive began, he discovered why the sheriff had been so eager to take a vacation. That day, Scatter-gun Grogan arrived in Montville and made considerable talk about how he wasn't going to take no foolishness from the Law or nobody. It didn't take Strawhead long to learn that Scatter-gun was a gent with an itchy trigger finger and always spoiling for trouble.

NOW, Strawhead wasn't exactly a coward. He simply didn't want to get himself killed at a time like this. Neither was he the kind to run out on his responsibilities. He wouldn't quit as deputy without resigning properly from the man who'd sworn him into office.

Thomas Jefferson Hopkins was really in a stew. He sat in the sheriff's office, watching Scatter-gun swagger up and down the street out of the outlaw's way and try to get a word to the sheriff to come home pronto and take over.

Then, to make it worse, the Montville-Luckylode stage was held up that night by two masked bandits while it was toting a big cash payroll to the mine. Within six hours, a rumor was out that Scatter-gun had had a hand in the robbery. Also, numerous citizens thought the new deputy ought to do something about it.

Scatter-gun Grogan laughed long and loud and said anybody with any brains

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would know he wasn't two men. Besides, he dared that danged deputy to even show his face in the Eagle Saloon and ask him if he'd held up the stage.

"Fact is," Grogan said, gulping a shot of red-eye, "I ain't seen hide nor hair of this here deputy since I landed in town. Wouldn't surprise me if he ain't scared to show his face."

Strawhead didn't stir from his swivel chair in the sheriff's office all day, except to put on the feed bag. Likely he would still be sitting there, waiting for Sheriff Tank to return, if Fireball Bailey hadn't come riding up in mid-afternoon.

Fireball hit the dust with a great jingle of spurs and came stomping into the office like a mad dog on the loose.

"You," he said, shaking his scrawny fist under Strawhead's long sunburned nose, "ain't got enough brains to stuff up the eye of a darning needle! Sendin' that bull-headed ole Ewald to your place with a herd of starved steers!"

"What's wrong with that?" Strawhead bristled.

"What's wrong with that!" Fireball took out a couple minutes to turn the air a dark purple with a string of cusswords. "I sold the hay the day before that danged old thief got there, that's what's wrong!"

Strawhead sank back on the swivel chair with a groan. He felt as if someone had hit him in the stomach with an ax.

"That's bad!" he gasped feebly.

"Bad!" Fireball let out a snort that was first cousin to a blast of dynamite. "You don't know the half of it. Like you told me, I sold that hay for cash and contracted to deliver it to the railroad. Then along comes this dad-burned Ewald outfit with your letter.

" 'Mister,' I says bein' polite, 'I'm sorry but you can't feed that hay. It's sold.'

" 'Can't feed it?' he says, pullin' his hawgleg on me. 'Just watch and see!'

"And him and his boys begin to bust open bales, and them hungry cows started gobblin' it down. Do you know what's goin' to happen to me and you?"

Strawhead was too stunned to even guess.

"We're goin' to land in jail for breakin' a contract! This gent who bought and paid for the hay didn't look like he would stand for no monkey business. He even said that if we broke our contract, he'd ride us till hell freezes over!"

Strawhead wiped the clammy sweat from his face.

"Also," Fireball added darkly, "this Ewald jasper figures maybe you tried to pull a fast one over on him, sendin' him down there with all them hungry critters when the hay was already sold. You should of heard the names he called you."

With another furious snort, Fireball dumped a wad of bills on the desk.

"There's your hay money," he said flatly. "I wash my hands of the whole danged business!"

Strawhead stared at the money and wished he was dead.

"Who," he asked faintly, "bought our hay?"

"Now, you know I never was no good at remembering names," Fireball said. "All I remember is that I signed a contract to deliver the hay to the railroad in Never-dry Creek Junction. Then this gent handed over the cash and stuck the contract back into his pocket."

Strawhead felt slightly ill. Anyway he looked at it, things had really got loused up. Shakily he stumbled to his feet, gathered up the money and headed for the door.

"I'm going fishing to think," he told Fireball. "I always do my best thinking when I'm catching a fish. If anything else happens and you want to find me, just follow that creek north of town upstream."

FIREBALL hadn't been alone in the sheriff's office two minutes before he got to wishing he was a lawman. Rummaging around in a desk drawer, he found an old discarded tin star. This he pinned on his soiled shirt front and took a squint at himself in a cracked mirror.

"Not bad," he said, squaring his round shoulders.

The screen door slammed behind him. Facing about, he found himself confronted by a big, burly red-whiskered gent who

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packed a sixgun in a way that showed he knew how to use it.

"Know who I am, Deputy?" the red-head gritted.

Fireball's tongue was suddenly frozen stiff to the roof of his mouth. But he did manage to shake his head.

"I," the gent said, tapping his chest with a big hairy hand, "am Scatter-gun Grogan. I figure it's time me and you was havin' a showdown. Now, about this stage robbery, I—"

Fireball didn't know what it was all about, but he did know he wanted to get out of there before the lead started flying. Quick as a cat, he lowered his bald head and charged. He caught Scatter-gun in the pit of the stomach and bowled him over.

The sawed-off old puncher didn't stop to see how much damage he'd done. He raced across the courthouse lawn, leaped into the saddle and turned his horse toward home sweet home. But he hadn't gone two rods before he saw a familiar face.

The gent with the face stepped back into a shadowy doorway, but Fireball had a good eye. With a choking gurgle, he wheeled his horse and raced northward toward the mountain stream. Coming to the stream, he followed its upward course. If he'd looked back, he might have seen a horseman following him. But in his excitement at seeing that face, he'd forgotten Scatter-gun Grogan.

Strawhead was in the middle of landing a fighting rainbow trout when Fireball found him.

"Strawhead," he panted, "I just seen—"

At that moment, Scatter-gun Grogan arrived on the scene with a sixgun in his big fist.

"No deputy can butt me in the stomach and live to tell about it!" he said with deadly calm, and drew a bead on Fireball's bloodless face.

Even if he was somewhat unnerved by these startling and unexpected events, Thomas Jefferson Hopkins couldn't just stand there and see his hired hand shot down like a dog. With a snarl, he whipped up the fishing pole. The exhausted trout come out of the water, sailed through the air and slapped the outlaw a stinging blow across his fury-filled eyes. Before Scatter-gun could get around to seeing who to shoot, Strawhead and old Fireball had dragged him from the saddle.

Once they'd gotten the ornery red-head under control, Fireball said, "The reason I rid out here was to tell you I saw the gent who bought the hay."

"Did you get his name?" Strawhead asked hopefully.

"Dadburn it!" Fireball exclaimed. "I never once thought to do that!"

"You," Strawhead said disgustedly, "ain't right bright!"

They rode back to Montville in stony silence.

WHEN they prodded the outlaw into the jail office, they found Sheriff Tiny Tank waiting for them. Word had reached the fat law-dog that folks were mighty displeased with his new deputy, and although he still didn't want any trouble with Scatter-gun Grogan, he also didn't want to face angry voters at the coming election. The moment he'd reached town, he'd been told some news that made his worry about Scatter-gun seem unimportant in comparison. Ignoring the outlaw, he pulled his gun and centered it on Strawhead's startled face.

"Don't move, you low-down snake in the grass!" he rasped.

"What's the matter?" Strawhead gurgled fearfully.

"Didn't know the mine payroll money was marked, did you? Thought you could put it in the bank and nobody would know where you got it. Well, looks like you slipped up, young feller?"

"That money," Strawhead wheezed, "was for my hay my hired man sold to a feller—"

"What feller?" the sheriff demanded.

"Why, there he goes now!" old Fireball exclaimed, pointing through the open doorway.

Strawhead and the sheriff took a look. The gent walking down the street was none other than Big Wheel Whalley.

Strawhead suddenly saw a great light.

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"Why, that danged ornery skunk!" he bellowed wrathfully. "When he found out I was going to help Ella's pa, he went and bought all my hay. And paid for it with stolen money to boot!"

Well, they found the hay contract in Big Wheel's pocketbook. Also, more of the marked money.

Seeing that he was in a bind, Big Wheel began to holler uncle. He said he wasn't going to take the rap by himself, that the stage robbery was Scatter-gun's idea in the first place.

Scatter-gun called him a yellow-bellied squealer.

Likely the two partners in crime would have torn each other limb from limb if the sheriff hadn't locked them in separate cells. . . .

You might like to know that after that Strawhead could have had a life-time job as deputy sheriff. But instead, he went into the cattle and feed business with his father-in-law.

Sitting before the fire on cold winter evenings with a couple of his grandchildren balanced on his knee, old man Ewald would smile happily and say to Thomas Jefferson Hopkins, "Son, the first time I seen you, I figured you was a no-good chicken-stealing bum."

Which merely goes to prove that you can't tell how deep the well is by the handle on the pump.

YOU CAN'T TAME OLD MAN WINTER

THE WEST MAY BE TAMED as far as gun-toting badmen are concerned, but Old Man Winter has never been tamed in the mountain country. There are new crops of tales each year when men, beasts and birds shake the snow off and emerge into spring weather.

Heavy snows always bring the wild animals and birds close to civilization. At Riggins, Idaho, one man had six guests in his orchard all winter—all deer. Another Idahoan had five beaver guests because he was kind enough to give them some apples. They found out where the apple box was, chewed off the lid, and had a feast. The man called the game department to come and get the animals. Before the game men arrived the man's busy guests felled several trees!

Jackrabbits came into Shoshone and ate out of garbage pails, and deer and elk came into snow-bound Hailey. One bull elk walked across the roof of one house. Wildcats and cougar trailed the big game herds. One young deer, apparently terrorized by a mountain lion, hitched a ride in the back of a car when the drivers of the car stopped to see what the trouble was. The deer didn't wait for an invitation. It just hopped in!

Men in isolated areas had their troubles, too, mostly loneliness, like one man who spent months at a snowbound mine. He had four cats as company, a radio that went dead, and one farm journal which he read until he had it memorized. A snow weasel finally rescued him.

Another man had a personal tragedy. He and a companion were clearing roads. The man's false teeth were chattering from the cold, so he removed them, putting them in his pocket. They dropped out into several feet of snow. The man spent quite a lot of time in the spring trying to locate them!

——Ferris Weddle

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

GIRL OF CAPRICORN
DEC. 23 — JAN. 20

EVENTS as well as people fall under the strange influence of the stars. On January 6, 1912, under the sign of Capricorn, the territory of New Mexico was admitted to the Union. On January 1st, 1863, the great Emancipation was proclaimed by President Lincoln. And the first locomotive ever placed in regular service on any American railroad puffed its original spout of smoke on December 25, 1830, thus, in time, changing the face and character of the West.

The girl born under this sign, ruled by Saturn, symbolized by a handsome, prancing goat, can expect excitement and popularity during 1953. She has much to offer the world: self-reliance, sincerity, ambition. She can find outlets for her many mental and spiritual qualifications, for honesty, integrity and an ability to swing with changes never went amiss. And she has these virtues.

Give the Capricorn girl a challenge and she's sure to succeed. Her natural abilities and gift for keeping her goal in sight are likely to put her ahead of her less single-minded sisters.

The Capricorn lass will find her truest mate to be a man who is not afraid of hard work, who is scrupulously sincere, self-reliant and as honest and faithful as she is herself. She instinctively avoids trivial things, idle chatter, gossip and unkindliness. She is constant and uniform in her behavior and will find her greatest happiness with a man she can trust utterly.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

Name.....Sex.....

Address.....

.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date of Month.....1-9-53

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OUT OF THE CHUTES

WHEN the harvest's in and summertime chores are done, folks in the Northwest are really in a mood to celebrate. Rodeos are bustin' out all over, accompanied by every kind of entertainment from juggling acts to trained seals, and by every kind of competition from beauty contests to ostrich racing.

Cowboys from all over the country converge on Washington, Oregon and Idaho, and find the entire population dressed in ten-gallon hats and blue jeans to welcome them. Naturally, the top-hands don't all travel to the Northwest just to feel at home there. In one two-week period there are four big rodeos within easy traveling of each other—Ellensburg and Walla Walla, Wash., Lewiston, Ida., and the Pendleton, Ore., Round-Up—offering over $26,000 worth of competition. And of course with one hundred or so cowboys entered in each of these shows, the entry fees swell up the purses considerably.

The two Washington rodeos are held on the same dates, but enterprising cowboys can compete in both because Ellenburg's show is held in the afternoon and Walla Walla's in the evening. It takes an airplane to do it, though, since the two towns are a couple of hundred miles apart. It's a nice drive, through the famous Horse Heaven Hills, but not one you'd want to make in the interval between a matinee and an evening performance.

At Walla Walla they call their doings The Southeastern Washington Fair and Rodeo, which is quite a mouthful, but it's also quite a show. Besides the rodeo this year there was also a stock show, horse racing, two parades, plus entertainment (both local and imported) sandwiched in whenever possible. We heard of a few spectators who thought they got a little too much for their money, but that's not a complaint that the Fair Committee is likely to lose much sleep over.

The youngsters aren't left out of the excitement in Walla Walla. In fact, the first day was Kid's Day with pony races, a carnival and free ice cream! The buttons had their own parade, and there were some 300 participants, not counting pets and dolls. At noon the fairgrounds (and the free ice cream stands) opened, and all afternoon the children were pop-eyed watching the same entertainment that had the grown-ups pop-eyed during the following three days.

There was a troupe of unicyclers who were received with such enthusiasm that many parents took precautions to keep family bicycles from being sawed in two. There was a Swiss family of yodelers, which the kids also felt called upon to imitate—and there weren't any precautions which the parents could take against that. There was a 10-year-old baton twirler (quick, hide daddy's cane!) and a cowboy band.

The hit of the show was Homer Snow and his musical marine stars—three trained seals who supplied the music and did all the work, a penguin who acted dignified and a pelican who flew off when the act started and didn't come back until it was over.

It may be hard to believe that with this abundance of entertainment (and we haven't room to mention half of it) the rodeo was more than an extra attraction. But every night it was the big draw and packed the stands.

There were new bucking chutes and holding pens built in the arena for the show,

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which made stock handling quicker and easier than ever before. The bulls and broncs were furnished by Max Barbour of Redmond, Ore.

The entry list was practically a Who's Who of past and present champions—and undoubtedly future ones too. What with the record number of contestants and all the festivities, there was only time for two go-rounds during the three-night show. The first go-round, in fact, had to be completed after the second one had begun, in an "after-the-show" performance that all the spectators stayed around for.

At first, Bud Linderman looked like a sure winner for the All-Around title. He won first place in both saddle bronc and bareback bronc-riding, and since the latter pays the highest of any event in this show, almost any placing in the second go-round was all Bud needed. His brother Bill was still in the running, however, having taken second place in saddle bronc-riding and a first in bull-riding.

Unfortunately for Bud he never placed at all in the second go-round, but Bill took first place in the saddle, which made him top money winner with about $900 to show for three days' work.

Gordon Davis won the calf-roping with a total of 25.8 seconds on his two calves. Vern Castro set an arena record of 10.8 seconds on one of his calves, but his time on the other was so slow that he finished out of the money.

The bull-riding was won by Bob Maynard, and Harley May threw two bulls in 19.2 seconds for the bulldogging crown.

Deb Copenhaver, the bronc-riding champ who lives in the Northwest and is naturally a great favorite around there, arrived fresh from winning top honors at the Kennewick, Wash., show. Plenty of his fans were on hand, hoping he'd repeat his victory at Walla Walla. But he didn't win any money or any points—only the biggest laugh of the show. One of his broncs was a spinner, and Deb made the ride all right, but when he was back on his own two feet he was still spinning around the arena like a top.

At the Ellensburg show there weren't as many trimmings. There they call it simply "The Rodeo" figuring that's enough excitement for anybody, and they seem to know, this being their 30th annual rodeo.

But the biggest thrill was an unscheduled one and might easily have been a tragic one. During the second performance the rodeo queen, Margaret Meagher, toppled from her horse as it was running full-speed in front of the grandstand. Her saddle suddenly slipped and she fell so hard that she rolled fifty feet along the track. The accident turned out to be just a mishap, for the queen suffered only bruises and "minor shock." The fact that it wasn't major shock is, we think, a great tribute to her royal

For the second year in a row a Texas cowboy, John Dalton, took home the championship buckle. He took first place in calf-roping (tying the arena record of 13.3 seconds on one of his calves). He came in third in bulldogging—and on his first bull had the critter down in the third fastest time in arena history, 5.5 seconds. That mark didn't last very long, however, because along came Lex Connelley who did the job in 5.2 seconds. And Lex really clinched first place when he threw his second bull in 5.3. The original arena bulldogging record, incidentally, still stands—4.7 seconds set by Jack Wade in 1940.

While we're on the subject of records, a new one was set in wild cow-milking. On the first day of the show a local cowboy, Smokey Kyser, racked up a time of 17.1. This so inspired the contestants on the second day that they came romping into the arena with a do-or-die attitude—and every one of them ended up with no time.

Casey Tibbs has recovered from his recent injuries well enough to win the bareback bronc-riding. J. D. McKenna won the saddle bronc, and Dwight Maddox was the bull-riding champ.

We said earlier that it's possible to compete in both the Walla Walla and Ellensburg shows. It's also possible to win money in both of them, and Bill Linderman did it, taking the first go-round in calf-roping at Ellensburg, which must have just about paid his expenses for the trip.

Adios,
THE EDITORS.

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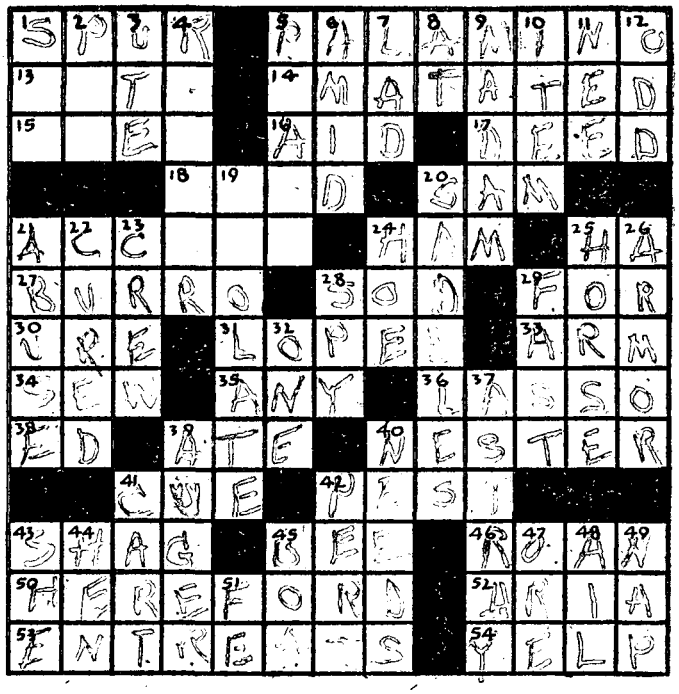
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Cowboy's boot attachment
5. Cream-colored horse
13. Jot
14. Issued forth
15. Observed
16. Help
17. Exploit
18. Overlay with gold
20. Our Uncle
21. Admittance
24. — and eggs
25. Exclamation of surprise
27. Western pack animal
28. Turf
29. In behalf of
30. Exist
31. Galloped easily
33. Upper limb
34. To stitch
35. One or more
36. Lariat
38. Man's nickname
39. Dined
40. Western squatter
41. Billiards stick
42. Nuisance
43. Strong shredded tobacco
45. Honey maker
46. Parti-colored horse
50. White-faced steer
52. Operatic solo
53. Plea
54. To bark shrilly

DOWN

1. Girl (colloq.)
2. Author of "The Raven"
3. Indian of Utah
4. Mounted Texas policemen
5. Resounds
6. Among
7. Boy
8. Forward
9. Lady's title of address
10. Detail
11. Born
12. Peculiar
19. To place by itself
20. Cowboys' chairs
21. To degrade
22. Healed
23. Group of seamen
24. Gardening tool
25. Trigger is one
26. Protective covering
28. Secret agent
29. Rapid
32. Half of two
37. Straying
39. Carpenter's tool
40. Poor
41. Light wagon
42. Saucy
43. The lady
44. Chicken
45. Large snake
47. Native mineral
48. To trouble
49. Short sleep
51. Forest Engineer (abbr.)

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

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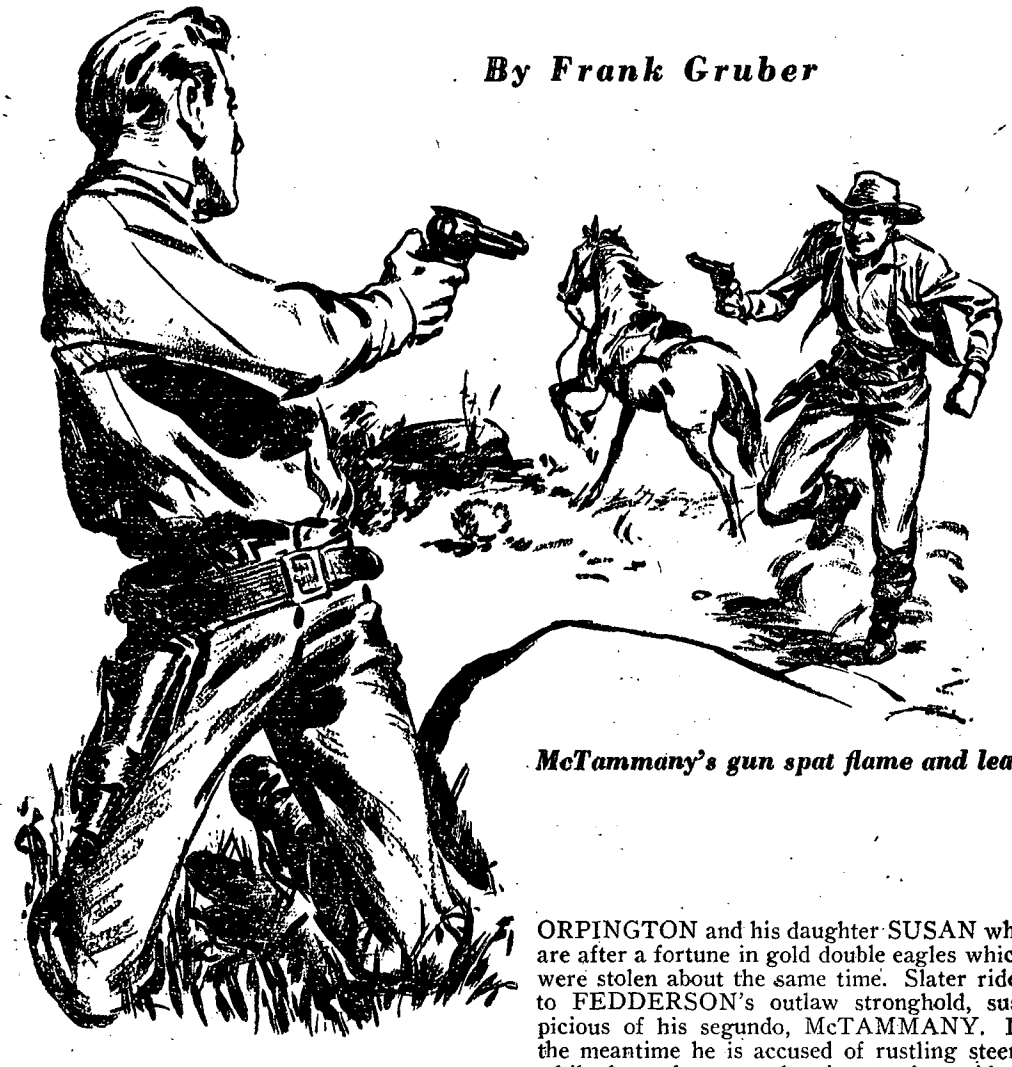
Fort Starvation

By Frank Gruber



McTammany's gun spat flame and lead

THE STORY SO FAR:

Tracking down clues to the mystery of his father's death in an Indian massacre at Fort Starvation, JOHN SLATER follows the trail to Texas where he finds DOUGLAS CARSON, now a rich rancher, who had been at the Fort. When he gets into a shootout with Rangers, Carson's niece HELEN takes care of his wounds. Accused by rancher HOLTERMAN of cutting wire he has never seen, Slater surrenders his gun in order not to kill the man. Also looking for clues to the survivors of Fort Starvation are COLONEL ORPINGTON and his daughter SUSAN who are after a fortune in gold double eagles which were stolen about the same time. Slater rides to FEDDERSON's outlaw stronghold, suspicious of his segundo, McTAMMANY. In the meantime he is accused of rustling steers while the outlaws are planning another raid on the Valley. . . .

PART THREE

ALMOST two hundred outlaws responded to Nick Fedderson's call. They came from all through the hills, two hundred men who had no home, who hated law and order and everything that went with it.

Nick Fedderson spread out a crude map before a half dozen of the sub-chiefs whom

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he had appointed or who had declared themselves as more than rank and file.

"This," he said, pointing with a calloused finger, "is Broken Wagon Valley. The different ranches are marked here—Carson's, Machamer's, Welch's. I haven't marked the little places because there are too many of them. We can count on from ten to twelve thousand head from Carson's place alone. Take everything, but don't stop for cripples. We're going to be crowded—and speed's the thing that'll win for us. McNeilly'll be here tomorrow, and I guess I don't have to tell you that he hasn't been *arresting* anyone lately."

He turned the map over to the others to study, and walked over to where Luke Vickers and Slater were waiting with a force of between forty or fifty men.

"The fightin's up to you. The rest won't have time; they've got to prod the herd along. Remember, it's a big game and a hard one. It's you boys who're holding the aces."

"Cut the speeches, Nick," snapped Vickers. "Let's get going!"

Fedderson swore in high humor. "You're fightin' mean, Luke. That's fine. Just keep thinking of that gold you're going to have tomorrow and you'll come through all right. You, too, Slater."

They were off then, with Vickers and Slater riding at the head of the fighting force. They rode out of the hideout valley, over the rocky mountain trail into the big valley beyond. Fedderson's force followed, but when they reached the big valley they broke up into smaller groups. Vickers' and Slater's group remained intact, however. The outlaws moved openly, for their force was too large to conceal. The nesters dotted the valley, but they were isolated spots that could not offer much resistance.

Yet it was a nester who drew first blood. Riding in the wake of one of the roundup crews that swept along the farmer's two cows, the fighting force was fired upon. An outlaw took the bullet in the arm and cursing, immediately charged the farmer who took shelter behind a wagon. He fired a second time and the outlaw toppled from the saddle.

VENGEANCE was swift and spontaneous. A half dozen men broke from the main body, galloped down upon the wagon in a wide fan and riddled the farmer with revolver bullets. They were all for burning the man's house and barns, but Vickers, backed by Slater, prevented it.

"The smoke'll warn others," Slater advised.

It was an hour before sundown when Ned McTammany and Nick Fedderson came galloping out from a clump of cottonwoods.

"Head for the west two miles," Fedderson cried. "Carson's herd is over there and his men are heading for it. It's going to be a fight but we've got them beat two to one."

The trooop wheeled to the left and went into a trot. McTammany fell in beside Slater. He leered wickedly. "Kinda surprised to see me in with the boys?" he asked.

"No," Slater said. "I guessed there was something crooked about you the first time I saw you."

McTammany snarled. "That's rough talk for a man like you."

"Is it?"

"Yes, and I don't mind telling you that there's something mighty fishy about you. You been asking a lot of questions around here."

"About a man named Al Johnston? Ever hear of him?"

"I've known two or three Johnstons."

"This is a man who held up an express gold shipment in Colorado, about ten years ago, a man who's got ten thousand in gold that he's afraid to spend."

"Give me ten thousand in gold and I'll spend it, all right," snapped McTammany.

"This gold can be traced and Johnston knows it."

McTammany stared at him. "What are you—a detective?"

"I'm anything but that, I assure you."

"Then why should you be looking for a man who's got gold that can't be spent?"

"Because this man knows something about what happened to some people in Utah . . . at a place called Fort Starvation."

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"Never heard of it."

"How long have you been with the Carsons?"

"Ever since they come out here, in '65."

"Then you've had plenty of chance to snoop through their things."

"Now, look here, Slater, or whatever your name is, I've had just about enough from you. . . ."

That was as far as he got, for the outlaw troop began pulling up. Fedderson and Vickers pulled up to Slater.

"There they are," said Fedderson pointing.

The outlaws had stopped on a small rise. Down below was a grove of cottonwoods and in front of it were a number of cowboys, twenty or twenty-five. When the cowboys saw the outlaws on the ridge, they quickly retreated to the shelter of the cottonwoods.

"How should we fight them?" Fedderson cried. "They got the advantage of cover, so our two to one don't mean so much."

"We ought to split and have half of them take them from the rear or the side," Luke Vickers suggested.

Slater shook his head. "That might not work. While half our men are flanking them, the crowd down there might take a sudden notion to charge the rest of us. The odds would be even. . . . but will our bunch stand up under a charge?"

Fedderson scowled. "Some will, some won't. They'll fight better if they got the edge."

"The answer's obvious then. Don't fight at all. The herd's out in the open. Why not just start prodding it along? Then if the cattlemen want to fight they'll have to come after us—out in the open. And they'll have to do the attacking."

Fedderson exclaimed in satisfaction, "That's it, Slater. I'd just as soon not fight if I don't have to."

Slater knew that Fedderson would have to fight sooner or later, but he wanted to postpone the fight as long as possible . . . until the opposition became stronger and had a better chance of winning.

The outlaw chief communicated his orders to the troop of outlaws and with a wild yell the outlaws charged down upon the herd, stampeding it. It was a few moments before the cowboys in the cottonwoods divined the intent of the outlaws, and then they emerged from their concealment to find the outlaws charging away from them. The cattlemen started in pursuit, but it became a rear-guard action, some of the outlaws hazing the cattle along, some carrying on a running fight with the pursuers. It was an inconclusive fight . . . but it gave Slater his opportunity.

In a wild charge of a dozen cattlemen, the outlaws scattered and Slater headed for a coulee. He distanced a couple of pursuers, climbed out and cut through a clump of cottonwoods. When he emerged from it the firing was a mile or more distant. He was alone without another living soul within a mile. . . .

MAJOR CARSON and Helen ate no supper that evening. The Major tried limping along the veranda a little to ease the stiffness of his wounded leg, but he gave it up after a while.

"I wish those blasted Rangers had come," he exclaimed to his niece. "They'd ride roughshod over us, but at least we wouldn't be having this kind of thing."

"I can't understand why we haven't had any word from the men," Helen said. "They must know we're anxious. You would think. . . ."

She stopped, listening, then stepped off the veranda to the ground. "A horse—galloping!"

"At last!" cried the Major.

The rider turned out to be John Slater. He dismounted in front of the house, came striding over to the veranda. Major Carson grabbed up a Colt from the chair in which he had been seated.

"You!" he exploded.

"Hold it, Major," cried Slater. "I've got important information that may help you save your herd."

"I'll bet you have!"

Slater shifted quickly from the Major to Helen. "Listen. I haven't much time. You've got to believe me. Your men couldn't hold off Fedderson; there weren't enough of

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them. There aren't any single outfits large enough to fight. The other ranchers and the farmers are fighting little battles of their own and that's wrong, all wrong. You've got to unite, your own men and the others. And you've got to stop Fedderson where he can be stopped—in the hills. I've seen his maps and I know where he's headed. There's a place about fifteen miles from here, where he can be halted, maybe licked. But you can't do it without at least a hundred men."

"Slater," the Major said ominously, "I advise you to clear out of here at once, before I shoot you down like the dog you are."

"Don't!" Slater exclaimed. "I don't give a damn for myself, but you—and all these men in Broken Wagon Valley are licked unless you get together and make a united effort."

The pounding of many horses' hoofs became suddenly distinct. Helen Carson cried out, "John—you'd better go!"

Her concern for him caused Slater to whirl on Helen. "Believe me, I'm telling the truth. Go to Holterman. He'll believe what I say."

"You and Holterman," the Major said thickly. "Damn you!"

"Uncle!" Helen said sharply. "He's telling the truth. Mary told me. He surrendered his gun to her father so he wouldn't have to kill Mr. Holterman. Mr. Holterman admitted it yesterday . . ."

The approaching horsemen thundered into the ranchyard. Slater whipped out his gun, but a voice from the darkness roared:

"Hold everything! We're Rangers!"

Slater inhaled sharply. For him these new arrivals were as dangerous as Fedderson's outlaws.

HORSES milled in the ranchyard, then two men walked into the shaft of light from the ranch house. One was Johnny Buff. The other was a tall, fierce-eyed man who wore a gun at each hip, butts turned forward.

"McNeilly," he said in a crackling voice as he came forward.

Major Carson exclaimed in a relief-flooded voice, "Thank the Lord!"

"Ha!" said Captain McNeilly. "I didn't expect to hear that from *you* from what I've heard about you, Major Carson."

"I didn't expect ever to say it," Major Carson replied fervently. "And I'll repeat it. Thank the Lord for the Texas Rangers. You got your company with you?"

"No," snapped McNeilly. "But they'll be here by morning. Right now I've got only twenty men with me. But I understand you have about thirty men. I want to swear them in . . ."

Carson groaned. "They're all out fighting Fedderson."

Johnny Buff raised himself on his toes and said something inaudible into his superiors ear. McNeilly whirled on Slater.

"You Slater, what do you mean shooting up my best men?"

Slater made no reply. None was necessary. McNeilly glowered at him. "What are you doing here? Buff told me you'd gone into the hills."

"I came back," said Slater. "To tell Major Carson how to stop Fedderson."

"He's lying, Captain McNeilly," Major Carson snapped.

Captain McNeilly turned abruptly to Helen. "What do you think, Miss? Is Slater to be trusted?"

Without looking at her uncle, Helen said: "Yes."

McNeilly turned to Slater. "What's your plan?"

"Fedderson has his outfit split up into a half-dozen units, with one strong fighting force that's supposed to range where it's needed. But the entire bunch will converge upon the trail leading through the hills. There's a pass, fifteen miles from here, where he can be stopped with a good force."

"But how are we going to get past him? He's already in the hills by now. He can beat us to the pass."

"No, he can't. He's got twenty thousand steers with him—he can't get to the pass before morning. You could cut across a couple of ridges and get there two hours sooner. Here—"

Slater stooped and with a finger drew

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several quick lines in the ground. "Here are the ridges, and here, winding through is the trail Fedderson's got to take with the herd. He can't cut across the ridges with the cattle, but horses can and if you'll take your men here, you'll be at this place by sun-up." Slater drew a short, straight line. "You can stop Fedderson here with fifty men."

"My men are chasing Fedderson," the Major said suddenly. "We can catch up with them and pull them off, then make the flank and cut across the ridges."

"That's what we'll do. Slater. . . ." The Ranger Captain gripped Slater's shoulder. "I want you to go back with Fedderson."

"By now he knows I've deserted."

"It's up to you to convince him that you haven't."

"And if I do convince him, what then?"

"Draw your own conclusions."

THE sun was just rising as John Slater studied the cabin-studded little valley that had been headquarters for Fedderson. It was empty of life now, but it wouldn't be for long.

A low rumble that shook the earth like a subterranean murmur told Slater that thousands of cattle were approaching. The first he saw of them was a cloud of dust far up the narrow defile. After a few minutes the steers appeared, a long narrow sea of them. There was only one direction for them to go, ahead, and they moved along quickly.

The outlaws brought up the rear.

Slater headed his horse down toward the biggest cabin in the little valley and standing close beside it, watched the bawling steers as they swirled past him.

He did not hear the step behind him, so when Alfred Orpington came up next to him he gave a tremendous start.

"Hello, Slater," Orpington said casually, grinning only slightly.

"What're you doing here?" Slater asked sharply.

"Why, you knew I was around somewhere, didn't you? I thought Susan told you."

"She did. As a matter of fact, I've been expecting to run into you, but . . . well, not here."

"What's the matter with this place?"

Slater nodded toward the riders now approaching along the side of the herd. "You know who those men are?"

"Nick Fedderson's boys. And there's Nick." Orpington chuckled. "Hold on, Slater. You're going to get the shock of your life."

"I'm beginning to suspect it already. You're the agent of the West Indies Government, who's buying this stolen stock."

"A man's got to make a living, doesn't he? So when I ran into this man down in New Orleans and learned he was in the market for cattle I saw no reason why I shouldn't cut myself in for a little profit. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"Not if the Texas Rangers don't catch you."

Orpington shrugged. "A bunch of Confederates."

"Here in Texas they're the law."

"Not west of the Pecos. Ah, here's Nick himself."

Fedderson, Vickers, McTammany and two or three other outlaws rode forward. Fedderson's eyes were on Slater.

"You damn traitor!" he grated as he came up.

"Traitor? Have Carson's men been dogging you since last night? Who do you think took them off your back?"

Fedderson's eyes narrowed. "You claim that *you* got rid of them?"

"I convinced them that the place to fight you was at the river, about twenty miles above where you're going to cross."

"He's lying, Nick!" cried McTammany. "Carson would have shot him down on sight."

"No, he wouldn't. He knows it was *you* started all the trouble between him and Holterman."

"You're a liar!" snarled McTammany.

"All right, McTammany, you've asked for it. You've got a gun . . ."

But a palsy suddenly shook McTammany.

"Well, McTammany, am I lying?"

"Go ahead, Ned," Vickers urged. "Put up or shut up."

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McTAMMANY still refused to accept Slater's challenge. Fedderson gave him a look of utter contempt and dismounted. He gestured to Colonel Orpington. "There's a little matter we've got to settle, Colonel."

"Quite right. If you'll wait one moment . . ." Colonel Orpington smiled pleasantly, stepped back into the cabin and reappeared almost instantly with a small carpet valise. He dropped it on the ground in front of the cabin.

"Your down payment, Fedderson."

Fedderson started to reach for the bag, then suddenly straightened. "The agreement was gold."

Colonel Orpington indicated the bag. "Gold."

Fedderson stooped again, unfastened the sack. He reached in, stirred the contents, then brought out a fistful of gold double-eagles. "There isn't a hundred thousand in this bag."

"Of course not," said the Colonel pleasantly. "There's ten thousand—"

"The agreement was a hundred thousand here and the balance on delivery across the river."

"Mr. Fedderson," Colonel Orpington said patiently, "I ask you—would a man bring a hundred thousand dollars here?"

"Why not?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Would a dog carry a pork chop into a den of hungry wolves? Your men are thieves, Fedderson, thieves and highwaymen. That ten thousand shows my good faith."

Luke Vickers' eyes blazed as he shot a look at Fedderson. "You said a hundred thousand here, Nick."

"So I did and a hundred thousand was the deal. We don't move this cattle until he coughs up the other ninety thousand."

Colonel Orpington shook his head. "You can't hold the cattle here, Fedderson. You know that as well as I do. You'll get the rest of the money on the other side of the river."

"I don't trust you worth a damn."

"Then we understand each other. I don't trust *you*, either. So shall we move along?"

The Colonel stooped, prepared to close the carpetbag as soon as Fedderson dropped the handful of coins back into the bag. But Slater suddenly moved forward.

"Let me see that money!" he cried in a terrible voice.

Fedderson, shocked, let a couple of the coins slip from his fist. Slater scooped up one of the coins, glanced quickly at it.

"Where'd you get this money?" he demanded of Orpington.

"It's good money."

"This is a Clark and Gruber double-eagle." He snatched another coin from Fedderson's hand. "And so is this."

"Those gold pieces are solid gold," said Colonel Orpington. "They're legal tender anywhere. If anything, they're worth more than the government issue, which is made from a gold alloy."

"I know that," Slater said grimly. "But I still want to know where you got these coins?"

"Now, Slater, I don't have to tell you that. The money's good and—"

Slater reached out, grabbed Colonel Orpington's collar and clutched it tight. "Where did you get it?"

In a fine rage, Orpington brushed off Slater's hand. "You're going too far."

"Don't you understand, Orpington?" Slater cried. "It was a coin like this that brought me here to Texas. The man who called himself Al Johnston gave one to Sergeant Lake in Arizona."

"What's that?" Orpington's eyes flickered to Ned McTammany. "Why, that would mean. . . ."

Slater had already caught Orpington's look. He whirled, hit McTammany savagely in the face with the back of his hand. "So you're Al Johnston. He got the money from you."

"That's a lie," whimpered McTammany.

Orpington stepped up to McTammany. "The game's up, Johnston, if that's your real name. You knew Sergeant Lake. . . ."

"You can't prove it," whined McTammany. "You can't prove nothin'."

"I don't have to prove anything," Slater said savagely. "What were you trying to find out from Sergeant Lake? Answer me, or so help me—"

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Nick Fedderson, who was standing by, jaws slack, suddenly moved forward. "Now, wait a minute, you fellows. What's this all about?"

"It's nothing that concerns you," Slater said.

"Everything around here concerns me," snarled the outlaw chief. "Where would a man like McTammany, or Johnston, or whatever you called him, get ten thousand in gold?"

"He held up an express shipment ten years ago," Slater said, "then he found out that he couldn't spend the money, because this was the total number of such solid gold coins that were made. It was as bad as if the coins were marked. They could be traced to him. He's been afraid to spend the money all these years. . . ."

"That right?" Orpington asked ominously.

"What's the difference?" McTammany snarled, suddenly bracing himself. "This money was going to Mexico—"

"It could still be traced to Mexico."

"But not to me!"

"No, not to you. You were going to take *my* money and skip with that, weren't you?"

"You think you're so smart?" sneered McTammany. "You and John Slater. You come down here snooping around, trying to find out what the Carsons knew. Well, I knew everything five years ago. I know that the girl's father was eaten by a bunch of cannibals. I knew about the gold that was there in Utah. I knew about Lake and Bonniwell and I knew about you, Slater. You didn't fool me none, when you rode in here."

"What did you know about Bonniwell?"

"I know where he is."

"Where?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

Zing!

A rifle bullet whined over the heads of the outlaws. It was followed instantly by another, then a regular fusillade. The outlaws whirled, started forward, toward the far end of the valley. Then they began milling their horses.

DOWN from the trail at the far end of the little valley, came a stream of riders. Fifty men . . . a hundred. Men armed with rifles, as well as revolvers, Texas Rangers.

"It's the Rangers!" roared Nick Fedderson. "They've cut us off!"

The Rangers began to fan out, riding past the cattle pouring forward. They came at a full gallop, firing. An outlaw went down from his horse, another.

Luke Vickers came toward Slater, his face distorted in savage fury. "You sold us out!" he cried.

His gun was already in his hand. Slater threw himself sideways off his horse. Vickers' gun cracked and a bullet hit the dirt inches from Slater's head. Slater rolled over completely, came to his knees, gun in hand.

The gun bucked and roared. Vicker's horse was suddenly riderless. A white-hot brand seared Slater's left shoulder. He half turned. Ned McTammany, on foot, blood streaming from a face wound, was rushing down on him.

Slater whipped up his gun. It roared at the same instant that McTammany's gun spat flame and lead. McTammany fell forward on his face. Slater crawled to him as McTammany tried to lift himself up.

"Where's Bonniwell?" Slater cried.

"Damn you to hell!" McTammany choked. Blood gushed from his mouth. "Damn you to hell . . ." He fell forward again on his face, shuddered.

Slater grabbed the dying man's body, turned it over. A half smile parted McTammany's lips.

"Ask Bligh . . . ask Curtis Bligh . . . 'bout Bonniwell . . ."

He lived another half minute, but those were the last words he uttered. When Slater rose to his feet, the fight in the valley was about over. Some Rangers were pursuing the remnants of the outlaw band, but McNeilly was riding back toward the group of cabins. Slater watched him approach.

McNeilly dismounted, came over.

"Who's that?" he asked, indicating McTammany's body.

"Major Carson's foreman. He sold out to Fedderson."

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McNeilly scowled. "Can't trust anybody these days. I'll bet Fedderson was the first to run when the shooting started."

"No." Slater walked over a few feet, looked down at the dead face of Fedderson. "He didn't run at all. Here he is."

McNeilly came over, looked down at the dead outlaw chieftain. He exhaled heavily. "All right, Slater, you did your job. You held them up long enough for us to come down on them. You can go. . . ."

The body of Colonel Orpington was not among the dead. He had made his escape. Yet he had failed to make his stake. He had failed in Arizona and he had failed in Texas.

Slater? Slater had not succeeded either. But a name had been gasped out with a dying breath.

Jim Bonniwell.

Lake . . . Carson . . . Bonniwell.

Another trail to follow. And somewhere along that trail would be Colonel Orpington. And Susan . . .

SLATER got out of the carriage before the Headquarters Building in Jefferson Barracks, near St. Louis. He said to the driver, "I may be a little while, but I'd like you to wait."

In the building an orderly directed him to the office of Lieutenant Colonel Peoples.

After the formalities were over, Colonel Peoples said: "Since receiving your letter I've been doing a lot of checking up on this matter." He shook his head. "Messy affair."

"My father was involved in it," Slater said.

"I know. And that's why I spent so much time on it." He pulled out a drawer, extracted a large manila envelope and emptied the contents onto his desk.

"There were five men. Your father, John Slater, Douglas Carson, George Lake, Axel Turnboom and Stephen Bonniwell. The Army spent a considerable amount of time and effort trying to locate the next of kin. In the case of Axel Turnboom no next of kin was ever located." He glanced at one of the papers. "For that matter, his identity was established only by the initials found on one of the revolvers and a letter addressed to Axel Turnboom, by a dry goods store in Logansport, Indiana. It seems Turnboom had left Logansport owing a small bill of $8.50. In Loganport our investigators learned that Turnboom was a bachelor, with no known kin. He'd been raised in the county orphanage and was employed as a sort of odd job man around town . . . until he went west in '57. . . ."

Slater nodded. "That checks with what I learned myself."

Colonel Peoples looked sharply at Slater. "You've contacted the next of kin of all these people?"

"All that I could locate—the brother of George Lake, a Sergeant in the Fourth Cavalry, the daughter of Douglas Carson, who lives with her uncle in Texas."

"That leaves Bonniwell." The Colonel consulted the sheet of paper again. "A brother, James Bonniwell, Ionia, Michigan."

"James Bonniwell enlisted in the Fourteenth Michigan Volunteers in July, 1861. He was wounded at Chickamauga, was invalided home . . . but never arrived in Michigan."

The Colonel nodded. "Not an unusual case. He was afraid he might have to return to his regiment. We called them cowards."

"You've been on the plains lately, Colonel?" Slater asked.

"Just finished two years' duty at Fort Laramie, four months ago."

"And you never heard of Jim Bonniwell?"

The Colonel looked at Slater, puzzled, then suddenly exclaimed, "Jim Bonniwell, the outlaw?"

"The same."

Colonel Peoples shook his head. "In Wyoming a lot of people think he's worse than Jesse James."

"Bonniwell's known," Slater said. "Why hasn't the law been able to get him?"

AT THAT Colonel Peoples chuckled. "Apparently we're not very familiar with western Wyoming where the Bonniwell gang holes up. Go out there some time."

"I intend to."

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"To get Jim Bonniwell?" The Colonel's eyes narrowed. He pursed up his lips thoughtfully, nodded slowly. His eyes flickered to the papers on his desk. He shifted them around, glancing at one sheet. Then he drew a deep breath.

"You had quite a talk with Major Benjamin out in Fort Ogden, some time ago."

"That's right. There's no secret about any talk anyone has with the Army."

"In the Army there's always a higher-up. You know that yourself. You've got to have the answers when a higher-up asks you the questions. You weren't satisfied with the report on the death of your father . . . a ten-year-old report. Odd, you waited."

"I got the original report in '61 immediately after I'd enlisted in the Army. When I resigned my commission in '65 I returned to school to get my diploma. . . ."

"That still gave you four or five years."

"Three," Slater said. "I left school in '67. Then I had to earn some money to enable me to make my search."

"Search for what? Foul play? The officer who made the original report said evidence of an Indian massacre was quite obvious. The—the other . . ." Colonel Peoples winced. "The other details are not pleasant, but they are not entirely without precedent. You've heard of the Donner Party in '47?"

"Of course. If it was only that . . ." Slater shrugged. "Lieutenant Orpington's report said that his detail buried five men. I have proof that six men were at Fort Starvation."

The Colonel exclaimed, "Six!" His eyes darted to the papers.

Slater took out his wallet, extracted a faded, much creased letter. He opened it carefully, handed it to Colonel Peoples. The latter read it through and leaned back.

"It's a well-written letter . . ."

"My father was an educated man."

Colonel Peoples nodded. "He states that he is spending the winter with five companions and that he is mailing this letter from Salt Lake, while in the city to get supplies for the winter . . ." The Colonel frowned, tapped the yellowing letter with a fingernail.

"This gold . . . no mention of it is made in Lieutenant Orpington's report." He looked up sharply. "Is that what's behind all this?"

"I believe so. When my father returned to Fort Starvation there were six men there . . . but only five were buried by Lieutenant Orpington. I want to find out what became of the sixth man . . ."

"And the gold?"

"No," Slater said bluntly. "I don't care for the gold. I'd give it all right now if I could put my hand on the sixth man . . . the one who deserted the other five, perhaps helped the Indians to massacre them. I'd give the gold to Orpington right now."

"Orpington?"

"He's also trying to find the sixth man . . . so he can get the gold."

"This is Lieutenant Orpington you're talking about—the man who found the—the remains of Fort Starvation?"

"Colonel Orpington—Brevet-Colonel Alfred Orpington. He resigned from the Army in 1865."

Peoples' fingers drummed his desk top. "Alf Orpington and I were classmates at West Point, although I haven't seen him since 1857. You're insinuating then that Orpington found this gold and appropriated it to his own use?"

"I'm not insinuating anything of the kind," Slater said bluntly. "In fact, I'm sure he didn't come upon the gold. My father's letter says that it was cached away for the winter—somewhere near the Fort. Colonel Orpington could not have found the gold—not without his men being aware of it."

COLONEL PEOPLES' face showed relief. "I'm sorry, Slater. While Orpington and I were not overly friendly at The Point, I still knew him quite well and to give him his due, I did not think he was the sort who would steal."

"What sort of people do steal, Colonel?" Slater asked sharply. "Born criminals? Or trusted servants of the public. Every man has his price. With some it's money, with others—"

"With some it might be revenge." Colo-

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nel Peoples suddenly evened up the edges of the sheets, slipped them back into the manila envelope. "Is there anything else?"

Slater regarded Peoples steadily. "I want a copy of Colonel Orpington's service record."

Peoples exclaimed, "But you just said. . . ."

"I said he didn't get the gold. But Orpington's been paralleling my own search. Everywhere I've gone, he's gone. He was in Arizona, in Colorado and then in Texas. He knows things that I don't know and I want to find him. I want to know every place he's served, every place he's lived. I want to back-track, because I lost him in Texas and I want to find him."

"I don't know," said Colonel Peoples. "The Army doesn't like to give out information to civilians. . . ."

"I put in four years in the Army myself."

"Then you ought to know regulations." Peoples shook his head. "We may have to write to Washington. . . ."

"Washington will refer it to the Western Department. This is Headquarters for the Western Department."

"The request will have to be approved by the General."

"I served under General Sheridan."

Peoples brightened. "I'll make a note of that in my request." He got to his feet. "It'll have to go through channels. Leave your address and I'll mail you the report—if it's approved."

"My address is the Planters Hotel."

Colonel Peoples wrote it down. Slater shook hands with the Colonel and left the building.

His carriage was waiting outside. Susan Orpington was sitting in it.

"You've been inside a long time," she said, as Slater opened the door.

Slater exhaled heavily. "The Colonel's with you?"

"I haven't seen him since—since Texas."

"But you knew *I'd* be here?"

"I asked myself what I'd do if I were you and learned certain things in Texas. I decided that if I were you and I ran into Colonel Orpington in Texas under—under suspicious circumstances . . . I decided that I'd come to Jefferson Barracks, which has all the records of all soldiers who ever served in the Western Department . . . I got here ten minutes after you did and the orderly told me that Colonel Peoples was engaged . . . with a civilian named John Slater. So—well, here I am."

SLATER climbed into the carriage and seated himself beside Susan. "The Planters Hotel," he told the driver. Then he turned to Susan. "Is that all right?"

"I'm staying there myself." She settled back against the cushion. "What happened to him, John? Captain McNeilly of the Rangers knew nothing about him and I—I looked over the bodies that were brought in to Broken Wagon."

"He got away."

"But why hasn't he written to me? It's—it's not like Dad. Even if he didn't want to come and see me, he would have written. I waited a week and then I stopped off in Lawrence. There's been no word from him."

Slater shook his head. "You know him better than I do."

"You talked to him down there in the hills?"

"Yes."

"Did you learn anything of his plans?"

"I learned that he was planning to steal about a half million dollars . . . the proceeds from the sale of stolen cattle."

Susan winced at Slater's bluntness and was silent for a long time. They were entering the environs of St. Louis before she spoke again.

"Dad's failed at everything he's tried. He finished the war a Brevet-Colonel, when men his junior were generals. His permanent rank was only captain and a—a boy named Custer was made a Lieutenant-Colonel. He failed in business. He—he needs money."

"Some men get jobs," Slater reminded grimly.

"Some men can hold jobs. Dad can't . . . he . . . needs money."

"All right," said Slater, "if he helps me

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find the sixth man he can have the gold, the entire sixty thousand. I don't want any of it."

Susan looked at him oddly. "What sixth man?"

"He hasn't told you? The sixth man who was at Fort Starvation."

"There were only five . . . your father, Douglas Carson, Axel Turnboom, George Lake and Stephen Bonniwell."

"There were six. Five died . . . but the sixth lived. I have reason to believe that he's alive today."

"I never knew." Susan frowned. "And that's why you're in this? You want to find this—this sixth man. Why?"

"Because I believe he betrayed the other five to the Indians."

Again Susan lapsed into silence. She did not speak again until they reached the Planters Hotel. Slater helped her out of the carriage, paid the driver. Then Susan said:

"So it's vengeance with you." She shuddered a little. "I—I don't think I like you, John Slater."

She went into the hotel.

An emptiness seemed to fill John Slater. He had held her in his arms and he had thought of her in the long nights and the bleak days. He had thought of her and he had thought of vengeance, as she called it.

He had known vengeance longer than he had known Susan Orpington.

Yet, *she* was after the gold. . . .

CURTIS BLIGH looked up from the sheaf of papers as Slater entered the private office of the most famous detective in the country. "Sit down, Mr. Slater," Bligh said, gesturing to a plush-covered armchair.

Slater seated himself. Bligh sized him up a moment, grunted, then turned a page in the sheaf of papers before him. He read a few lines, shook his head, then looked up again at Slater.

"This is your dossier, Mr. Slater," the great detective said. "I've had it made up since you were in here the day before yesterday."

"I couldn't write that much about myself," Slater said evenly.

"Your war record is excellent," Bligh said. "I see you were at Antietam. My men did rather a good job of reconnaisance before that battle. I told McClellan it would be a hard battle."

"It was. We got licked."

"That's not the way it'll be in the history books. But you're quite right. It wasn't a victory, so it had to be a defeat." Bligh made a brushing gesture of dismissal. "You're a Harvard man, Mr. Slater."

"That's against me?"

"Frankly—yes. You want to become a cowboy detective."

"A detective—not a cowboy."

"Just a figure of speech. "You want to go against a band of ruffians, train robbers, killers."

"I want to get Jim Bonniwell and I think I can do the job."

"I wonder. I've lost four men already to Bonniwell. I've been on his trail since sixty-six and I'm no nearer getting him now than I was at the start. Yes, I want to get him. I want Jim Bonniwell badly . . . but I don't want to lose another man to him."

"If I'm killed you won't hear any complaint from me," Slater said with heavy sarcasm. "And I've no kin to sue you."

"That's in your favor. Do you have any idea of what you might be up against, if you invaded Bonniwell's territory?"

"I intended to try to get into his band—join him and destroy him from the inside."

"That's what you said the other day, and frankly the idea appealed to me." Bligh cleared his throat. "It's what I might have done myself, fifteen, even ten years ago. And I think, in the end, it's the only way anyone will ever get Bonniwell. But a college man, joining a band of outlaws! I don't know."

"Mr. Bligh," Slater said slowly, "I'd rather have an organization like yours behind me, because I think you can help me, but whether you employ me or not, I'm going to get Jim Bonniwell. Alone . . . if I have to."

Bligh leaned back in his chair and studied Slater. "I think you mean that."

"I do."

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THE best way to describe Beaver Rapids is to say that it was a big town for its size. It consisted of two rows of false-fronted frame shacks, interspersed with log cabins and a canyon between them. The town boasted a nice log cabin jail and was kept well filled by Bernie Cassidy, reputed to be the best peace officer west of Ogallala. He had killed eight men and wounded only two.

Slater, wearing patched levis, rundown-at-the-heel boots, a woolen shirt and a flat-crowned black Stetson, swung down from the stagecoach and looked up and down the street. He saw the sign of the Placer Saloon, a short distance away, and started for it. He hitched up the cartridge belt from which was slung a worn holster that contained a Navy Colt.

The Placer Saloon turned out to be a long narrow room with a bar running down one side of it. A number of tables were scattered about and at the far end of the room was a low platform on which stood a weathered piano.

There were perhaps a dozen patrons in the place when Slater entered and moved to the bar. A stocky bartender ambled over.

"Whisky," Slater said harshly, "and I mean whisky, not the watered-down bilge you sell the local citizens."

The bartender got a bottle and a glass and set them down before Slater. "Pretty salty, aren't you?"

"Salty enough." Slater poured whisky to the very brim of the glass. As he picked it up, some of the stuff sloshed over onto the bar.

The bartender noted that and scowled. "From Texas, eh?"

Slater tossed down the whisky in a single gulp, shuddered and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Any law against a man being from Texas?"

The bartender shrugged. "For all of me you could be from Jackson's Hole. But we got a marshal here who don't like Texas men. He don't like 'em a lot."

"Well, I don't like marshals. That makes us even."

He poured out another glass of whisky, again spilling a few drops. He set the bottle down and started to pick up the little glass. At that moment a youth of nineteen or twenty came through the batwing doors and strode up to the bar beside Slater.

He was a skinny kid wearing filthy levis and a floppy Stetson, but two gun holsters were tied low on his thighs. He gestured to the bottle in front of Slater.

"Gimme that."

Slater drank his whisky, gave the youth beside him a calm glance and, deliberately picking up the bottle, began to pour himself a third drink.

The kid's face distorted in sudden rage. "I said, gimme that bottle."

Slater continued pouring out whisky slowly, carefully. "You ain't hardly old enough to drink," he said.

The bartender winced and held out a placating hand, not to Slater, but to the wild-eyed youth beside him.

"Now, wait a minute, kid!"

BUT the boy ignored him. He stepped sidewards, went into a crouch. "Look here, you moth-eaten saddle bum," he snarled at Slater, "do you know who I am?"

"A brat who isn't dry behind the ears!"

The bartender shouted, "He's Johnny Cool!"

"Oh, yeah?" sneered Slater. Then he reached out suddenly and smacked Johnny Cool in the face with the back of his hand. The blow sent the boy reeling back . . . into the arms of a tall, well-built man in his mid-thirties, who had come up from behind.

Johnny Cool recoiled off the other man, started to reach for his guns. But the man with whom he had collided sprang forward and throwing both arms about the kid, pinioned them to his sides.

Johnny Cool struggled furiously in the man's grip. "Lemme go," he howled, "lemme go and I'll kill 'm. Nobody can slap Johnny Cool and live."

"Let him go, Mister," Slater said sardonically, "and I'll really slap down his ears for him. That seems to be what he needs."

The man who was holding Cool whis-

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pered something into his ear and the youth eased off on his struggles. After a moment, the man released Johnny Cool. There was still fire in his eyes, however.

"All right," he said thickly to Slater, "all right this time, but the next time I see you, you better be wearing your iron."

"What for?" Slater asked mockingly.

"'Cause I'm telling you!" snarled Cool.

He lurched past Slater and headed for the door. Slater did not look after him. The man who had held Cool smiled quizzically at Slater, but there was no humor in the smile.

"Stranger," he said, "I got a hunch you aren't going to live to wear a long, grey beard."

"I'm doing all right."

"Sure, you're doing fine."

The other man shook his head and followed Cool through the door. Slater turned to the bar, picked up the bottle. The bartender let out a long, slow sigh.

"Mister," he declared fervently, "that's the closest you'll ever come to shoving off, without really making it."

Slater looked at the bartender in surprise. "A kid like that?"

"Ain't you never heard of Johnny Cool?" the bartender asked incredulously.

"Can't say that I have. Is he supposed to be bad?"

"Ain't none worse. Some say he's kill crazy. Lucky for you Mr. Parker grabbed him."

"*Mister* Parker?"

"Yeah, Alan Parker. He's got a big ranch up north a ways."

"Oh," said Slater, and poured out a glass of whisky.

HE WAS still pouring out whisky two hours later. The lamps had been lit in the saloon by then and the place was crowded with evening patrons. Slater didn't see them, however. He could scarcely see the bartender.

He waved the empty whisky bottle in the direction he guessed the bartender would be.

"Gimme another bottle this stuff you call whisky."

A voice from behind the bar said: "Don't you think you've had enough?"

No drunk has ever had enough, and the bartender should have known it. Slater banged the bar with his fist. "What's that, you jumpin' sidewinder? You tryin' to tell me how much I can drink? Why, you—"

He threw the empty bottle. The bartender dodged and the bottle hit the backbar mirror. The crash of the glass must have penetrated Slater's dull senses, for he backed away from the bar . . . into a table. He fell over the table, knocking it to the floor and scattering money and cards.

A card player swore feelingly, "You drunken bum!"

Slater rolled clear of the wreckage, got to his hands and knees. The card player kicked at him, but Slater lurched sidewards and the foot missed him. He grabbed at it with both hands, upset the body behind the foot, then used it to climb to his feet.

He put up his hands, ready to take on all comers.

"All right, fellas," he challenged, "come ahead. One at a time, or all of you. It don't matter to me. I can lick any man in this damn town."

The marshal came swinging through the doors, heard the last of Slater's challenge. He was a lean, hungry-looking man with a black patch over his left eye-socket. A wrongdoer had emptied that socket and Bernie Cassidy had a justifiable hatred for all wrongdoers.

He came up behind Slater. "All right, you." He grabbed Slater's left arm. Slater pivoted and his fist connected with Bernie Cassidy's jaw.

Bernie Cassidy reeled back. A glint came into his one eye. He whipped out his long-barreled Frontier Model. "You asked for this," he said tonelessly, then sprang forward and laid the barrel of the gun along the side of Slater's head.

A thousand little devils were pounding the side of Slater's head. The pain was exquisite but for a long time Slater could not fight it. Then suddenly he sat up and opened his eyes. The little devils disappeared, leaving just one great ache in his head.

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THE first glance around told Slater that he was in jail. His second look revealed a disreputable-looking oldster in the adjoining cell. The oldster was sitting on his cot, his back against the wall, studying Slater with morbid interest.

"How you feel?"

"Lousy." Slater touched the side of his face. "How'd I get here?"

The man in the adjoining cell showed blackened teeth in a grin. "Bernie Cassidy drug you in."

"Cassidy?"

"The Marshal. He buffaloed you."

Slater winced. "I must have been drunk."

"Wouldn't be surprised. Sober now?"

"How long've I been here?"

"Oh, you came in early. Round seven. It's close to eleven now. Which is pretty quick soberin'—if you're sober."

"I'm sober."

The other man chuckled. "They call me Fresno."

"My name's Slater, John Slater."

"Howdy, Slater." Fresno chuckled again. "Didn't take you long to get in here, did it? You only hit town this afternoon."

Slater scowled. "What're *you* crowing about? You're not exactly in church, you know."

"I'm in here by mistake." Fresno got up and came to the bars separating his cell from Slater's. "I got into an argument with Marshal Cassidy. That was a mistake."

"A tough character, is he?"

"Bernie Cassidy? Ain't none tougher. But I got nothin' to worry about. Alan Parker'll get me out."

"I've been hearing of this Parker. He's a big man around here?"

"He's only the most important man in the territory," Fresno said enthusiastically. "Besides which, he's my boss."

"Does he pay you extra for the advertising?" Slater asked sarcastically.

"He don't have to," retorted Fresno warmly. "And lemme tell you something. . . ."

"Later. Just now I want to get out of here." Slater got up and went to the cell door. He gripped the bars and yelled at the top of his voice.

"Marshal! Marshal Cassidy!"

Fresno watched Slater with a jaundiced eye. "Go ahead'n yell. See if it'll do you any good."

Slater yelled again. A third time.

The door leading to the front of the building opened and Bernie Cassidy appeared. He looked dispassionately at Slater. "Now, look, you're not going to give me trouble tonight, are you? I was up all last night with a couple of drunks."

"I want to have a talk with you," Slater said.

"It'll wait until morning."

"It won't. I've got to get going."

"You can get along in the morning—after you pay your fine."

Slater lowered his voice. "I want to tell you something—about Chicago."

"Chicago?"

"Yes, Chicago."

Cassidy came up to Slater's cell and unlocked the door. Slater stepped out. Cassidy dropped his hand to the butt of his Frontier Model. "In my office."

Slater walked through the door. Cassidy followed.

CASSIDY'S office contained a rolltop desk, a couple of chairs, a cot and reward notices and posters in lieu of wallpaper. Cassidy closed the door leading to the jail section.

"All right, now what's this about Chicago?"

"Ever been there?"

"Yes."

"Talk to a man about . . . Vicksburg?"

Cassidy regarded Slater steadily. "Seems to me I did," he said evenly. "But I can't remember the man's name."

"Was it . . . Bligh?"

Cassidy exhaled heavily. "You sure picked a funny way to introduce yourself!"

Slater touched his aching head. "I hadn't counted on the clout on the head."

"You're lucky that's all it was." Cassidy suddenly looked at the jail door. "I *would* have him here tonight."

"The old coot?"

"Fresno."

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"He's one of them?"

Cassidy shrugged. "He hangs around with Johnny Cool sometimes." He suddenly pointed at Slater. "Heard you had a run-in with Johnny. What were you trying to do—commit suicide?"

"I didn't know who he was at the time." Slater frowned. "You think Cool's one of Bonniwell's boys?"

"Of him I'm sure. And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if old Fresno. . . ." He shook his head. "That was bad—picking a fight with Johnny Cool. He may cause you trouble."

"Ornery, is he?"

"Don't know if he's the worst, or Billy Burks."

"Johnny Cool—Fresno—Burks. Who else do you suspect? What about Bonniwell?"

"Who's Bonniwell? A name. He could be anyone. If I knew who Bonniwell was, Curtis Bligh wouldn't have had to send you here. By the way, what's your plan?"

"To get in with the gang."

Cassidy winced. "Are you serious? You couldn't get within twenty miles of Bonniwell's hideout."

"I'm going to try." Slater looked thoughtfully at Cassidy for a moment. "Look, Bonniwell's outfit is tough. We know that. They've been getting away with it for years. They're no longer local bad men. They're big time, so big that the railroads have hired Curtis Bligh—the greatest detective in the country."

"Sold on him, are you?" Cassidy asked.

"He's paying me my wages."

Cassidy nodded. "Look, Slater, I'm going to tell you a few things about Jim Bonniwell. I thought Bligh knew already."

"You mean about the ranchers being friendly to Bonniwell? About the gang's secret post offices up and down the Wasatch Range? The spies . . .?"

Cassidy seated himself in the swivel chair before the rolltop desk. "You knew all that and you still think you can get in with Bonniwell?"

"Bligh thought you might be able to help."

"There's only so much I can do." Cassidy shook his head. "I don't know much about you, but the fact that Bligh picked you for this job means you're probably a pretty good man."

"I am," Slater said quietly.

Cassidy grunted. "You're going to have to be an awfully good man. Well, it's your funeral."

"Maybe it will be."

"There's a ranch about thirty miles from here—northwest. It's just on the edge. Run by a fellow named Kellerman. I'm thinking he might know the bunch. If he doesn't—" Cassidy shrugged. "You'll just have to keep going . . . north and west."

Slater moved to the desk, reached for the ring of keys Cassidy had put down. Cassidy exclaimed, "What's the idea?"

"I'm going to lock you up."

"No, you're not," Cassidy retorted grimly. "I'm willing to help you, but this is my town and—" He started to reach for his gun. He never touched it, for Slater hit him, a hard blow that caught the lean marshal on the point of the jaw and sent him down—cold.

Slater dragged him into the jail section, where Fresno watched with bulging eyes.

"Coming up, one marshal!" Slater sang out.

"Jumpin' Judas!" Fresno said in awe. "I don't believe it. Nobody could do that to Bernie Cassidy. Nobody."

"You can tell your grandchildren about it."

"If I had any grandchildren, which I ain't."

Slater deposited the unconscious Marshal on the bunk that he had himself only recently vacated. Then he came out and locked the door. He looked at Fresno.

"Coming along?"

"You mean you're going to run for it?"

"That's the general idea."

Slater unlocked Fresno's cell, then tossed the keys through the bars into Cassidy's cell. Fresno scratched his head.

"I dunno, Cassidy ain't going to like this."

"Stay then. Explain to Cassidy that you weren't in on it. Think he'll believe you?"

Fresno hesitated, then came out of the

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cell. "You got a point." But there was a frown on his face. "Say, that talk between you and Cassidy, that Chicago stuff—what was that?"

SLATER grinned. "I saw a poster down at the stage office. Five hundred dollars' reward for a Chicago bad man. Guess he thought I was him. That's when I hit him, while he was going through the reward notices."

Slater went through the door into the Marshal's office. Fresno followed, but without much enthusiasm. Outside the jail building he became quite nervous.

A horse was tied to the hitch-rail. Slater moved toward it. Fresno bleated, "That's Cassidy's horse!"

"Looks like a good animal."

"Are you crazy? You can't take Cassidy's horse."

"Why not? He can't do any more to me for taking his horse than for what I've already done to him."

"But everybody in sixty-six miles knows Cassidy's horse. I wouldn't be seen riding it for all the money in Wyoming."

Slater moved back reluctantly. "You may be right."

"Doggone right I am. You can get a horse at the livery stable. I got one there myself."

The livery stable was lighted by a single lantern under which the liveryman sat in an armchair, sound asleep. Fresno kicked the chair and the liveryman came to his feet before his eyes were opened.

"Fresno! I thought you were in jail."

"I was."

"Cassidy let you go before morning? He must be getting soft."

"Maybe he is." Fresno gestured to Slater. "Can you fix up my friend with a good horse?"

"I want to buy one," Slater said.

The liveryman brightened. "I got just what you want, a black gelding only five years old." He moved to a stall, opened it and brought out a black horse.

"Here he is, mister. Yours for only a hundred and ten. . . ."

"Sixty dollars!"

"I paid ninety-five for him." The liveryman was indignant.

"What'd you get with him? A gold-studded saddle and diamond bit? I'll give you seventy-five."

"Give him eighty," interposed Fresno, "if he throws in a saddle."

He chuckled and stepped into a stall. He came out leading a fine chestnut mare. He mounted and half saluted Slater.

"So long, pardner!"

"Wait a minute," Slater exclaimed.

"Can't. I'm in a hurry."

He dug his knees into the belly of the mare and the animal dashed out of the livery stable. Slater turned impatiently back to the liveryman.

MORNING found Slater nearing the foothills. It was shortly afterwards that he encountered a farm wagon loaded high with furniture and farming implements. A man and a woman sat on the wagon seat. The man regarded Slater sourly as the latter pulled up, facing him.

"Howdy?" Slater said cheerfully.

"Howdy," was the curt reply.

"I'm a stranger hereabouts," Slater went on, "and I'm wondering if I'm lost."

"Where're you headed for?"

"Kellerman's place."

The man on the wagon winced. "You're headed right, only you want to turn left when you get to the top of the next hill." He picked up his lines. "Good day to you."

"Good day," Slater said.

He rode on, reached the crest of the first hill and turned left. He entered a valley of wild beauty and after a while came to a little stream where he dismounted and hobbled his horse so that it could graze. He stretched out on the grass himself and was asleep in three minutes.

The sun was past the halfway mark when he awoke. He tightened his belt, caught the black gelding and mounted it.

It was late afternoon when he reached the crest of a low hill and looked down upon Kellerman's place. It consisted simply of a log cabin, a log barn and a pole corral.

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FORT STARVATION

Slater rode up to the barn.

"Hello, there!" he called out cheerily. Colonel Orpington came out of the barn. He wore levis, a fiannel shirt and a flat-crowned, weathered Stetson.

"What kept you so long, Slater?" he asked.

Slater stared at Orpington, as grudging admiration welled up in him.

Susan Orpington came out of the house. She wore a gingham dress, her face was scrubbed, her hair twisted in a tight coil.

"Hello, John," she said easily.

Slater exhaled wearily. "Hello," he said and dismounted from his gelding. "I was under the impression that a man named Kellerman owned this ranch."

Orpington smiled thinly. "Kellerman was an old broken-down cattle rustler, who'd lived about twenty years longer than he'd had any right to. I bought this place from him. The whole shebang . . . three hundred dollars."

"I never thought of you as a farmer," Slater said slowly. He looked at Susan. "And I somehow can't figure you as a farmer's daughter."

"As a matter of fact," Susan said carefully, "I happen to like farming. We've got a couple of cows, some horses and chickens. And if you're staying for supper, you'll discover that I'm a rather good cook. I've got biscuits in the oven right now."

"You're staying?" Orpington asked.

"You couldn't drive me off." He regarded Susan steadily. "And I like biscuits, hot, with home-made butter."

The supper consisted of steak, potatoes and biscuits. When he was through eating, Slater said to Susan: "It's been a long time since I ate a meal as good as this."

"The food is very good at the territorial penitentiary," Susan said. "At least that's what some of our guests have told us . . . the guests we've had this past month."

"Jim Bonniwell's men?" Slater asked.

ORPINGTON shrugged. "They don't trust me—yet. They think I'm a spy. But they stop here and eat,

[*Turn page*]

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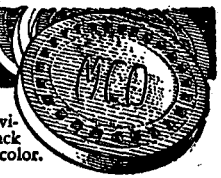

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then go over the hill to the west." He paused. "For all I know, Bonniwell may have stopped here. These men don't give their names. And by the way, *our* name is Hastings."

Slater pushed back his chair, started to get up. Then suddenly he stiffened. From outside came the clop-clop of a horse's hoofs. Susan got up from the table, stepped past Slater to the door.

"It's Alan Parker," she said.

Orpington whirled on Slater. "What's your name?"

"Slater."

Orpington nodded, stepped to the door. "Come on in, Alan!" he called.

Alan Parker came into the house.

"Alan," Orpington said, "shake hands with John Slater."

Parker looked sharply at Slater. "Looks like I run into you everywhere I go." He took Slater's hand.

Slater grinned. "I owe you one for that business in the saloon. I heard about the kid later."

"I heard about *you* later." Parker shook his head. "Bernie Cassidy sends his regards."

Susan interrupted. "Alan, there's some steak left."

Parker rubbed his hands together. "Good."

Susan looked at Slater. "Stop in again, sometime, Mr. . . . Mr. Slater, is it? When you're not in such a hurry."

"Thanks," said Slater. He went to the door. Orpington frowned slightly. He wanted to talk some more, but the presence of Parker interfered. He nodded.

Darkness fell within the hour, but Slater was well along the trail over the mountain by then. The country got rougher, but the trail was a well-defined one and the gelding followed it without difficulty. He was a sure-footed animal and the darkness did not seem to bother him. And after a while the moon came up.

After three hours of riding, Slater halted for a couple of hours, but did not go to sleep. When he climbed into the saddle again the gelding began to climb.

The trail became narrower and in a little while was no more than shelf spiralling up a steep mountain. The gelding picked his way carefully, stopping once or twice.

The false dawn was graying the sky when the animal stopped again. Slater dismounted and worked his way carefully along the narrow ledge to the horse's head.

"Sorry," he said, and gave the reins a sharp jerk.

The gelding whickered and tried to retain his balance on the ledge, but lost it and slipped over the side. It scrambled and slid to a ledge twenty feet below, where it regained its balance. Slater followed down, patting the horse.

Then he groped about the ledge and found a chunk of rock. He held it for a moment in his hand, then gritting his teeth, jammed it sharply against his knee.

He could not quite restrain a yelp of pain, and hopped up and down on one foot for a moment. Then, the pain subsiding, he pulled up the trouser leg and exposed a nasty cut. He bound a bandanna tightly about his knee, put down the trouser leg and remounted the gelding.

DAWN came grudgingly a half hour later and melted into daylight when Slater rode down into a flat, narrow valley that ended three or four miles away against a sheer cliff.

A little stream wound through the narrow valley. Slater rode beside it. Halfway down the valley he made out a rough shack, set almost against the cliff. The color of it had faded so that it seemed part of the cliff itself.

The end of the trail.

A bullet whined over Slater's head. Before the report of the rifle came, Slater was down on the ground, diving for the shelter of a large boulder beside the little creek.

The Frontier Model he had appropriated from Bernie Cassidy was in his hand as he peered carefully from behind the boulder.

Spang!

A bullet chipped a splinter off the boulder. Slater whirled, turned back as a bullet from the front kicked up sand nearby. Then he got to his feet, his hands going

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slowly up to his shoulders.

A man stepped out from behind some boulders in front. In the rear a man with a rifle stepped out from a clump of scrawny cottonwoods.

"Drop the gun," the second man called.

Slater let the Frontier Model clatter to the ground. He looked toward the cabin, saw two men come running out. These he recognized: Old Fresno and Johnny Cool.

The two men who covered Slater awaited the approach of their reinforcements. It was Johnny Cool who first recognized Slater.

"The Beaver Rapids bad man!" he yelled.

Fresno looked unhappy. "How'd you come to follow me?"

"I didn't." Slater looked at Johnny Cool. "Hi, kid, how've you been?"

"I been wishing I'd see you again," Johnny Cool said. He came forward.

The man with the rifle moved forward swiftly. "Now, wait a minute, Johnny."

Fresno said hastily: "This is the fella I was telling you about—the man who got the drop on Bernie Cassidy."

Cool said icily: "I don't give a goddam about Bernie Cassidy. But I owe this ranny something and here's where I pay off."

The rifleman stepped in Cool's way. He dropped his gun.

Slater laughed without humor. "Oh, the boy wants gunplay, does he?" He started to stoop for the Frontier Model, but Fresno gestured him back with his own gun.

Slater said, "Well, if you shoot men out here without giving them a chance . . ."

"You'll get your chance," the rifleman said.

"Get out of the way, Rodebaugh," Johnny Cool snarled.

Fresno scooped up Slater's gun, looked at Rodebaugh. The latter moved sidewards as Johnny Cool tried to step past him.

"Let him have his gun," Cool whined. "Let him have it. He took a crack at me in Beaver Rapids and I warned him to be wearin' his iron the next time I saw him."

"Well, let me have it," Slater said impatiently.

[*Turn page*]

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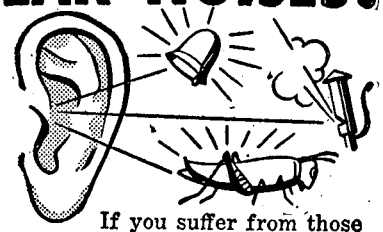

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RODEBAUGH shook his head stubbornly. "You'll touch no gun until the boss talks to you. And you, Johnny, you hold off. You know what the boss told us to expect."

The kid pointed at Slater. "Him?"

Rodebaugh nodded. "Yes."

Johnny Cool relaxed. "All right, I'll wait. But Jim's got to let me have him."

"He probably will," Rodebaugh said. He turned to Slater. "Come along, Mister."

Slater limped forward. "This Jim, suppose he might give me a job?"

"A job?" Rodebaugh asked sharply.

"This *is* a ranch, isn't it?"

Johnny Cool laughed wickedly. "Yeah, it's a ranch. Jim Bonniwell's ranch."

Slater looked at Fresno. "Thought you worked for Alan Parker?"

"I do, sometimes," Fresno replied.

Slater limped toward his horse. Fresno watched him. "Hurt your leg?"

"My horse fell." Slater pulled up his trouser leg, revealing a badly swollen thigh—from the too tight bandage. Fresno exclaimed, "Say, that looks bad."

"I've known it to feel better."

Slater seated himself on the ground, began to untie the bandana. Johnny Cool came up with the fourth outlaw.

"Mr. Hackett," he said mockingly, "like you to meet my friend, Mr. uh, Mr. uh . . . what'd you say your name was? Or don't detectives have names?"

Slater looked at him coolly. "Detective?"

"How's Mr. Bligh?"

Slater grinned. "Have your fun. This one's on me." He jerked the bandage off his wounded leg. Fresno dropped to one knee beside him.

"Here, lemme help you with that."

"Why bother?" Cool sneered. "Come noon and it won't hurt no more. None at all."

Rodebaugh moved up, took one look at Slater's knee and gestured to Fresno. "Get some water."

Fresno scrambled up and hurried to the stream. Taking off his hat, he filled it with water.

There was a chance, Slater thought.

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Fresno and Rodebaugh. Johnny Cool was against him and the fourth man, Hackett, seemed neutral. Put him on Cool's side. That would make it two and two. But Jim Bonniwell, the leader, would decide.

THEY were gathered outside the cabin toward noon when a rider appeared down the valley. Hackett and Johnny Cool went out to meet him, leaving Rodebaugh and Fresno to watch Slater.

Slater watched the approach of the newcomer with interest. He seemed strangely familiar, but it wasn't until he was close that he finally recognized Alan Parker.

"Jim Bonniwell, eh?" Slater said when Parker rode up.

"Jim Bonniwell. Bonniwell or Parker, take your choice." Bonniwell smiled. "Didn't think we'd meet again, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

Rodebaugh seemed puzzled. "Know him, chief?"

"I think so, Fred." The grin left the outlaw's face. "All right, Slater, drop it."

"So you think I'm a detective, too?"

"Prove that you aren't."

"You prove I am."

"You mean the business in Beaver Rapids?" Bonniwell shook his head. "Doesn't mean a thing. You landed in town looking for a fight. You picked one with Johnny Cool, then with somebody else. You got thrown in the clink."

"He buffaloed Bernie Cassidy," Fresno offered.

"Maybe."

"Naw, Jim, I looked at Bernie and he was sure 'nough out—cold!"

"Bernie's a lawman. It could have been a put-up job."

"You think so?" Slater asked carelessly.

"How come you headed right for Kellerman's place?"

Slater laughed. "You think this hideout is a secret? I heard about it in Cheyenne—in Ogallala. The Wild Bunch is known all over the west."

"But you hadn't heard about Johnny Cool."

[*Turn page*]

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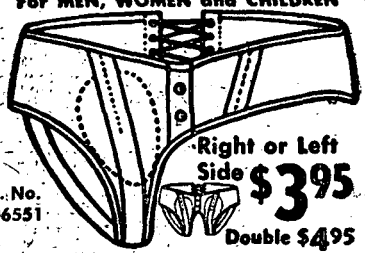

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"Oh, yes, I had."

Bonniwell glowered. "All right, maybe you weren't afraid of Johnny Cool."

"He'd better be afraid," howled Johnny.

Bonniwell gestured him to silence. "You may be on the level, Slater."

"Thanks," said Slater mockingly.

Bonniwell looked at Slater through slitted eyes. "You've done a good job, Slater. I'll admit I'm not sure about Cassidy, but the Hastings say you acted like a man on the dodge, and you certainly traveled like a man in a hurry." His eyes dropped to Slater's leg. "What's the matter with your leg?"

"Pretty bad bruise," Rodebaugh said. "I looked at it."

"Where'd it happen?"

"On the other side of the mountain," Slater said, pointing. "Up near the top, where the trail gets narrow. My horse slipped to a ledge below."

Bonniwell's eyes glowed. "Fred," he said to Rodebaugh, "take a trip up the trail. Check on that." Rodebaugh nodded and went for his horse.

Bonniwell looked steadily at Slater. "Nobody but a damn fool—or a man in a hurry would travel most of the night. If your story checks, Slater . . ." He shrugged. . .

In the late afternoon Rodebaugh came into the cabin. He nodded in response to Bonniwell's inquiring look. "Horse fell, all right. And there was a stone with some blood on it."

"So I pass," Slater said laconically.

Johnny Cool, who had been held in restraint all day by Bonniwell, advanced on Slater. "Not with me you don't pass," he snarled.

"All right, sonny," Slater said calmly. "You've been asking for it."

(To be concluded in the next issue)

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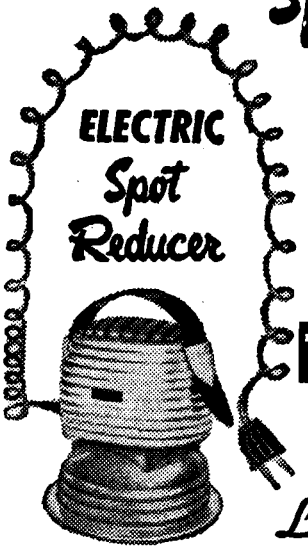

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